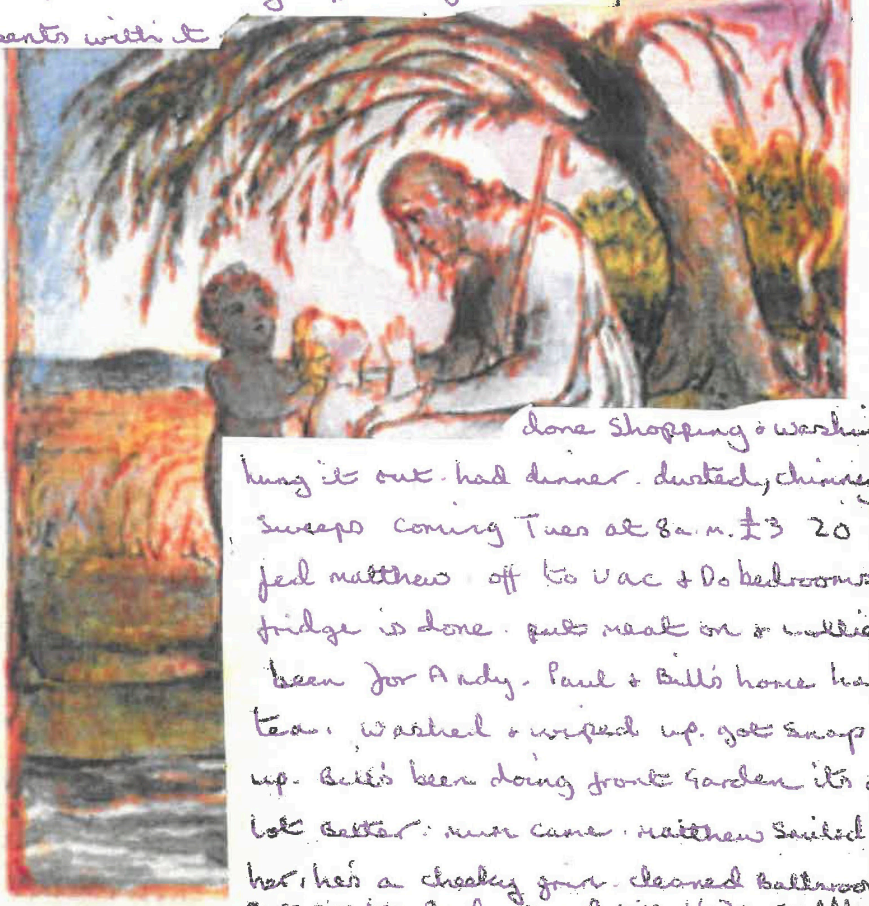
LUMPEN

A journal for poor and working-class writers

Issue 008
Summer 2021

Thursday September 14th
got up at 8. fed Matthew. he's 8 weeks old today. got Ready Paul's gone, took Andrew. washed & dressed Matthew & fed him again. he's just been Smiling at me. Bless him. lit fire. he's gone to sleep. off to go down Paddock for family Allowance & Phone chimney Sweep. to defrost fridge. do washing & Vac & dust got £20 Back Pay. off to buy Some Xmas Presents with it.



done Shopping & washing hung it out. had dinner. dusted, chimney Sweeps coming Tues at 8a.m. £3 20 fed matthew off to Vac & Do bedrooms, fridge is done. puts meat on & cuddle been for Andy. Paul & Bill's home had tea. Washed & wiped up. got Snap up. Bill's been doing front Garden it's a lot better. mum came. Matthew Smiled at her, he's a cheeky grin. cleaned Bathroom put am to Bed. record till 11.30 cuddled up in Bed.

Collage from *Songs of the English Working Class/The Making of Experience* by Matt Travers

Lumpen

A journal for poor and working-class writers
Issue 008

First published Summer 2021

Each author asserts their moral right to be identified as the author of their respective work

Edited by Shan Stephens, D. Hunter, Dorothy Spencer, & Hannah Pearce
Designed by Hannah Pearce
Copy-edited by Alison Gray

ISBN: 9781914125089

We printed this issue using an online print service because printing co-ops aren't affordable to us. All workers still got paid. But sadly, there was at least one boss involved in the process of publishing this journal.

Contents

Editorial - Dorothy Spencer - 1

Deaf in College - Deaf Advocate - 8

First Wave - Veronica Leigh - 16

Four Short Essays About a Pub - Dan Melling - 28

Marked - Fiona McCulloch - 34

Brilliant - Jen Herron - 42

Working-class Lives in 1980s Peckham - Amy Todd - 44

Songs of the English Working Class - Matt Travers - 64

Kiss My Proletarian Arse - Eugene Egan - 74

No Bother - Dom Hale - 90

The Importance of Personal Hygiene - Olie Martin - 92

Dennis - A. Taylor - 112

The Christmas Grab Bag - Jim Donnelly - 126

Watershed - Connor Robertson - 132

Erinyes - Robert Jopson - 144

Class and Kambridge - Josh Askew - 146

At the Windows - Penny Pepper - 154

Drift - Tom Stevens - 162

LUM
PEN.

Editorial

Dorothy Spencer

Me and my partner recently posed as wealthy arty-types interested in buying a flat in DAMAC tower—DAMAC being a luxury block of flats in the Nine Elms development site, currently the biggest regeneration project in Europe.

The tower stands a hundred metres from Vauxhall station, rising like a glass scream from the chest of Vauxhall market, where we spend every Sunday (long may it sustain us). The interiors are by Versace Home—that Medusa head logo most commonly seen on knock-off sunglasses and cocaine mirrors. As the website states, here you can 'live the complete Versace lifestyle, a fantasy turned into reality'.

Being both fascinated and appalled by what people with large excesses of money do and wanting to witness in what way the area was going down, we felt it might be a good way to spend an afternoon. I told the estate agent I'd sold my two-point-five million home and was looking for a flat. Two-point-five mil is whitebait

to these lot, but they aren't selling many one-beds, infact the development has been somewhat of a failure—with estate agents slashing prices by twenty-percent. We set-up a viewing for Wednesday.

Posing as a wealthy person is much easier these days, since they so often go undercover themselves—whether in ten-year-old Air-Max or by biting down on the plum in their mouth. We opt for an arts identity as they seem the sort most likely to have plum juice running down their chin and creases in their creps. Sam, a gallery owner, tells the estate agent he met Donatella Versace at Art Basel. I find myself becoming the rich-man's subservient girlfriend, lingering in the background and commenting on the drapes.

The DAMAC website states: 'Nine Elms in one of London's most rapidly transforming areas' which translated means it's being propelled from a place of markets, Portuguese delis, Dominican basketball games, Columbian barbeques, low-rise council housing and ex-squatted terraced streets to a taller, quieter and sadder place of glass, steel, wind tunnels, and Maseratis in underground car parks. They've also deleted Vauxhall, of which there is no mention in any of the marketing, despite it being exactly where the building is—because it is to become 'Nine Elms', not the 'lousy location' that Donald Trump branded the area when he refused to cut the ribbon on the new US embassy. In the same way that Brentford gets smaller and smaller and 'Kew Bridge' has a boundary that expands like a heart in love, to nicely fit prime property prices.

We meet Mohammed outside the building. He gives us some spiel about the anticipated splendour of the entrance and exclusive restaurant opening before we ask him about the part of the building that is clad in red and sticks out like a chilblain from twenty floors up. The chilblain turns out to be the affordable housing, hanging on like the embarrassing friend you don't want to be seen with but who arm links you at every opportunity.

Mohammed tells us reassuringly that firefighters and teachers will live there. The sort of poor people you stand on your doorstep and clap for. But they do enter through a separate entrance with none of the lavish decoration, the so-called 'poor doors' that are a feature of all of the developments around here. They also won't have access to the lobby, gym, and swimming pool. He says we will have those facilities pretty much to ourselves as no one else is actually going to live here, if they ever even visit. Most of the flats are brought as investments, largely by foreign elites—Mohammed sells at least half of the apartments from a brochure over the phone without the buyers ever seeing them. Like ordering from Argos for billionaires. And sometimes they never do visit, selling again when the price is favorable. Mohammed points out the penthouse suite in the tower opposite—St George Wharf Tower, the first skyscraper in the area and which set the bar for the rest (once one building has been granted planning permission that high it is hard to refuse others). The Penthouse is owned by former Russian senator Andrei Guriev who purchased it for 51m in 2014—all these years later and it is said he is yet to have stepped foot inside. Big empty palaces in the sky.

The place is a partial building site, and we are led through corridors past the prison-like canteen for the 700 workers that are on site. There are four lifts up and the labourers need them too—we get ushered in past some queuing workers where an Eastern European bloke, covered in cement dust, is manning an unfinished Versace lift. 'This is a very good job,' he says. 'Stay here all day, very good job.' He presses the button, and we go up. Small talk ensues; I feel gross. We are the people who (very much don't) have the cash to buy the buildings they've put up—through years of badly paid work—to never be lived in. They are also the people most aware that the houses are made of MDF and glue dots. Haha us.

Gentrification, the etymology seems obvious but hadn't struck me until I googled it for this piece of writing. Gentry–Fication, coined

by Ruth Glass in the 1960s to describe the arrival of the 'gentry' into working-class neighbourhoods and those neighbourhood's subsequent transformations.

The DAMAC gentry in this fication are not yuppies. Mohammed tells us around forty per cent of the buyers are Qatari and twenty per cent of those are Al Thani, the ruling family in Qatar. Often held through secretive offshore companies based in tax havens, the official address of ownership for the penthouse across the road is a company's office in Jersey, an advisory firm that promises to "exploit every legitimate opportunity to protect and preserve family wealth".

This isn't Brixton, where whiteness brought it's furniture, where glass-fronted coffee shops and tote bags spread like mould on a peach. These are ultra-rich people, unlikely to spend much time here, but whose money is carving out the area like a glacier—creating a landscape of glass and steel towers, shadowy streets, and negative space.

The Versace design is extreme. The sofa is wearing earrings, the chandelier is chicken wire, the bed is twenty grand of vapid cream leather, the Medusa head has already broken off the cord for the bedside light—because actually it all looks pretty shit. If anyone actually lived in and used these apartments as homes, they would break like a Brexit promise. They are display models, decoy homes, fakes—containers for cash, not people and potatoes and photos-on-the-wall.

The Nine Elms project represents a new feat in social segregation and cleansing. The affordable homes are priced at eighty percent of the market rate (a definition the Conservatives secured in 2012, but hardly affordable for many in London). The 'affordable' residents cannot even elect to pay for use of the facilities in the main building, the green spaces are full of 'no no no' signage and

monoculture grass mowed to the millimetre. It's all so depressing—there are so many barriers to community building here they seem to be folded into the design like cocoa into cake batter.

The deepening of wealth divides since COVID, which has seen the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, isn't an abstract—a Guardian article or a policy maker's graph, it's in our neighbourhoods, in our deeply divided capital city where the rich float in glass boxes smoking shisha, doing breaststroke while suspended 115 metres above us in brilliant blue swimming pools.

It's predictable and hellish, a feverish dream of a neoliberal city. Cruel, ugly, insipid and anonymous; speculative, fuelled by global finance in a deregulated market. In the end I hate the buildings, I hate the loss of light, I hate the skyline, the architecture, the colours, the new businesses, the cars, the suits, and I hate the people, and I hate being angry all the time and feeling when I cross the Vauxhall Bridge that I'm losing any hope I had of a good future here.

On the ground are people living in real houses built for people, and these people—especially when poor—have established communities. Traditionally, disadvantaged and racialised groups build community infrastructure where gaps in state provision (and there are enough gaps to drain your pasta through) leave them vulnerable. Whether this be informal networks for support, care, or getting housing and work through friends, the forced economic dispersal of people leaves them isolated in all sorts of ways, weakening and destroying communities.

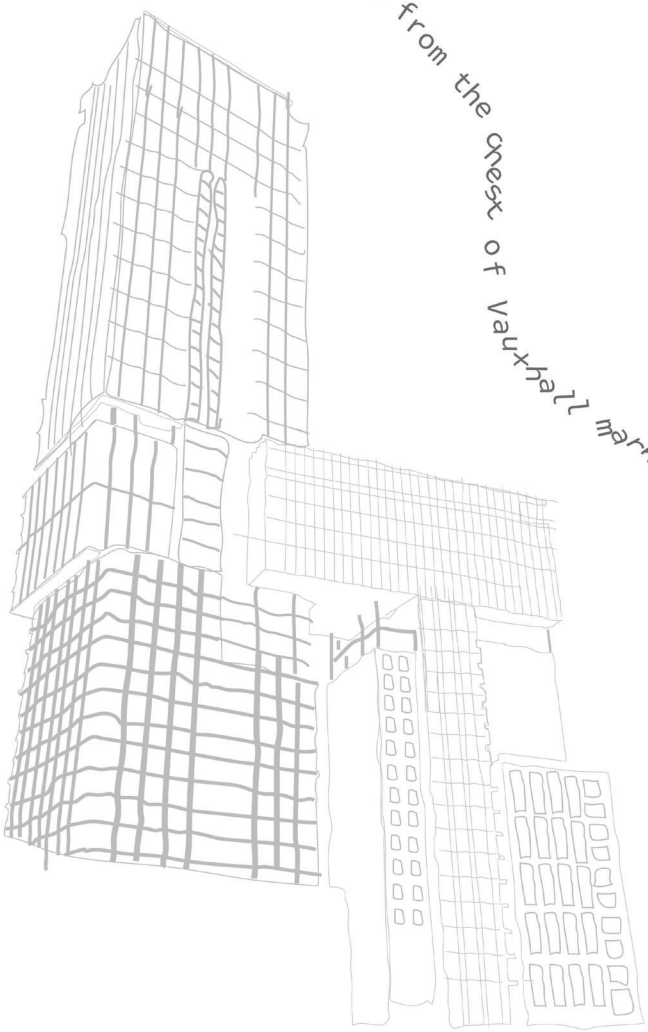
Despite all the apparent money, I can't help feeling that I'm in a three star hotel. It has all the loneliness of a roadside travelodge; indiscriminate, transient, impersonal luxury. Watching the lone swimmer make his journey across the sky I wonder how any of us can feel at home here—held apart from each other by our money, our race, our class. Not that I feel sorry for the ultra-rich or anything—

I'm still more than happy to eat them.

Lives are built in the physical world, their possibilities constrained and expanded by such things as bricks, shadows on the grass and friendly cafes. This isn't just about houses, it's about people having a home in these streets, one they can imagine staying in, one that they belong in, not one in which they are regrettable quotas excluded from spaces that remain empty nonetheless.

And where will I go? When the market's gone, when all the streets are dark and windy, when the people aren't friendly, when I can't flirt with the grocery-shop owner anymore cus he couldn't afford the rent. And my displacement from the city I was born in will probably mark the displacement of some other people from a place they were born in and where they'd rather not have Londoners flirting with their grocery-shop owners. Finding a home in capitalism when we are all running from pillar to post to survive, when physical spaces that cater to working-class communities are fewer and fewer, when all the pubs are gastro or hipster, when the community centres are closing, when the grocery shop is a Tesco and nobody stays, not for good. Making a home in capitalism is hard, yet we hope you can find something of home in the pages of this journal, a place where people are trusted, valued, cared about. While the confidence of the neoliberal elites soar like glass skyscrapers, the edifices are also crumbling, the Medusa head is already broken, the basement is flooded, the glue dots don't last forever. To the fall of these buildings, figureheads, and lousy futures I dedicate this issue of Lumpen, a journal for poor and working-class writers. A small and meta-physical space for working-class life to find a home.

rising like a glass scream from the chest of Vauxhall market



Deaf in College

Deaf Advocate

About two years ago I found myself working in further education colleges with students who had been given an EHCP (Educational Health Care Plan) due to their varying levels of deafness and hearing loss. Some students have hearing aids, some don't, some speak sign language, most don't.

I work with students aged 16+ on their vocational and functional maths and English qualifications. It's been an eye opener for the quality of teaching and opportunities available to those systemically marginalised by their disability. I came to the job because I didn't want to put my touch typing and admin skills to work to facilitate individual (rich) artists anymore, and the hourly pay was nearly the same—but with much clearer responsibilities and boundaries. A relief. Plus I love love the energy in colleges. It's mostly optimistic, people are working toward something, and, even if the resources are crushingly inadequate, we're all here together, and … yeah I can't follow that one through. Exploitation throbs through everyone, everywhere, here. Apart from maybe the mostly white 'leadership' team.

My job is to take notes in classes for Deaf students who may be too busy lip reading or watching a BSL interpreter to take notes at the same time. I make sure to get all the key information down for them, making sure that they don't miss the extra bits, and that

my notes are appropriate to the literacy level of the student. I am an operative for The Agency (a business) that cares more about the potential financial implications of the GDPR litigation than the individual needs of the students they are meant to be working *for.* I am given no prior information about the student, and often (because I'm zero hours, casual) I'll turn up once, part way through their term, and then not ever again.

How do I work out the students' literacy levels? I am still to find out if I'm ever getting it right for them. Sometimes, they don't want to acknowledge that I am there to support them at all; they are seventeen—it's all humiliating enough. But slowly, if The Agency allocates me to work with them regularly over the term, I might quietly be able to build up some trust and rapport, and can ask them privately if the notes are helping, or if I could change the notes in some way or another. They—having invariably been given no agency at all over the kind of support they've received throughout their mainstreamed (and oralist*) schooling—rarely seem to feel bold enough to ask for what they need or like. One student asked me to make the font purple cos they liked that, and I was so happy.

The college I work in most often is poor in all the senses of the word. Its resources are shoddy, either non-existent or broken. The people who work here are hopelessly stretched, and some do give as little as they get (low pay, excessive bureaucracy and no resources are reflected in their miserable and apathetic teaching), others attempt to even the keel by over-giving, and over time that seems to crystallise into resentment and gruffness. Or they leave.

I love the students I work with, and really want them to do well. But I have very little input or import in these lessons, since my job is only to take notes. I occupy a strange presence in the classroom. Some teachers are so unaware of the needs of their Deaf students

that they don't really understand why I'm there at all and some feel affronted by my presence—like I'm an auditor or something, tapping away on my laptop, sticking out like a sore thumb … It's usually those teachers that I have to remind to put subtitles on the videos they show in class, the same ones that often completely ignore the student who has both a communication support worker (CSW) and a notetaker because they think, 'That student has two people helping them. I'm off the hook.' And then they teach in the most chaotic way, which makes it completely impossible for the interpreter to relay adequately to the student—who is just like, *rolls eyes* right ...

My CSW colleagues, translating lessons for d/Deaf** students were usually qualified at BSL level 3 or in some cases level 6 in their sign language competency. They cannot therefore technically be called interpreters. This means, in reality, that the translators often do not have the linguistic skills to effectively convey complex meaning to the student who is dependent on them for this. This means that the student receives a poorly mediated version of a sometimes already poorly taught lesson. As a result, a lot is left for the student themself to piece together, maybe like being taught through a kaleidoscope? A cursory look at the online options available to find an interpreter who specialises in academic sign language does not yield much at all. The fact is, Deaf BSL users are not making it to higher education in large enough numbers to warrant a useful hit on a Google search.

There is nothing more intense than seeing some students be treated like a pain in the ass, cos the teacher just doesn't have the resources or capacity to give them what they need. It takes time, energy, and inclination to give students what they need. Person-centred learning environments are an upper-middle-class concept, and not possible in an over-stretched, under-resourced city college.

Person-centred learning environments are an upper-middle-class concept, and not possible in an over-stretched, under-resourced city college.

Deaf people do not have cognitive difficulties, until they are put into mainstream schooling. They are effectively expected to cope with not hearing in environments designed exclusively for hearing students. State colleges and schools (read 'businesses') are putting all students with physical disabilities together with students with different needs, with echoes of the asylums of the 1950s. It is the draconian results of neoliberalism in educational settings. Management of these institutions is designed simply to cut costs: reducing the care and responsibility of the educational institution by palming off teaching and communication support via agency workers, and piling pressures onto teachers by giving them more students with different needs, but with no extra support.

○

Hearing student in class: Is sign language universal?

Me: No

Student: Oh, what a shame. It should be.

Me: Yeah, but languages are like cultures, they are different.

Student: Yeah, I know, but they should be the same across the world. Words mean the same thing, so the signs should be the same.

Me: Yeah, but no.

Communication is a human right. The UK has not legally recognised BSL as a language for Deaf people (Scotland has though) and they do not subsidise teaching and learning BSL at all. The UK government made the gesture of ‘recognising’ BSL in 2003, but has since done nothing to give BSL legal status***. Deaf schools with Deaf

teachers have been slowly closing down for decades (due to lack of state funding), and only a few remain—this is a state-led attempt to culturally eradicate BSL-speaking Deaf culture and community. The cochlear implant is not a cure, and the uninformed parents of Deaf babies are told otherwise, meaning that their Deaf child may not meet another Deaf person until it is too late. By 'too late' I mean they have not developed sufficiently in either language, BSL or English.

BSL is a language and a culture, and it's the natural language for those who do not hear sound and thus don't use sound to express themselves. Communities need to be protected. I work for an agency that makes money off the vestiges of state subsidies for the catch-all label of 'Disabled'.

○

* Oralist refers to the state-imposed ideology of imposing speech on Deaf students. Via a congress attended by mostly hearing educators in 1880, it was legislated that Deaf children should learn to speak in school, and sign language was banned from the classroom. This continued until The Conrad report, released in the 1960s, showed that Deaf people were leaving school at sixteen with the literacy age of eight. Although schools don't force Deaf children to learn to speak any more, the cultural hegemony of oralism lives on and Deaf-led and sign-language schooling is being squeezed into nonexistence.

**I use d/Deaf when I am referring to a cohort of students that range from hard of hearing (HoH) non-hearing-aid wearers, who are unlikely to be active members of a Deaf community, to profoundly Deaf BSL users, who also may or may not be active members of a Deaf community.

*** Deaf campaigners are currently lobbying parliament to have a BSL Bill passed. You can help by contacting your local MP to lobby them for support. Email BSLActNow@bda.org.uk for a template.

Further reading and links

Greenwald, Brian H., and Joseph J. Murray (eds), *In Our Own Hands: Essays in Deaf History 1780 - 1970,* Gallaudet University Press, 2016

Ladd, Paddy, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood,* Multilingual Matters, 2003

Bragg, Lois (ed) *Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2001

BSL Zone:
www.bslzone.com
Deafinitely Theatre:
www.deafinitelytheatre.co.uk/event/time-to-speak-louder
That Deaf Girl KJ::
www.youtube.com/channel/UCt9if1Sk0CWl9hYL0hdI82w
www.limpingchicken.com
www.deafumbrella.com

BSL is a language and a culture.

The First Wave

Veronica Leigh

This is a series of diary entries written during the first COVID wave from March to May 2020.

My day at the nursing home begins with parking my car behind the building and walking around to the front, as we are to enter through only one door. My temperature is taken, I sign in, and clock in. I collect trash from seven or eight rooms: main bathrooms, soiled linen room, eye-washing station, spa, dining area, and, depending on the wing I'm working in, either the therapy or activities room.

Once trash is taken out, I load my cart with supplies and chemicals, then clean those aforementioned rooms. Washing fixtures, railings, sinks, toilets, and mopping. I then try to clean three or four of the residents' rooms, wiping their tray tables, cabinets, phones, windowsills, door knobs, bathroom fixtures, toilets, then mopping floors, and collecting more trash. At approximately 9.15 a.m. I go to the main dining room, clean sinks, cabinets, collect trash, and mop. I take a ten-minute break to get a snack and use the bathroom. Then I head back to the residents' rooms and clean ten or so of them until noon. My lunch break is thirty minutes, but I often only take twenty and head back to work. I clean more residents' rooms until 1.00 p.m. when I have to mop the dining areas again. I make an effort to finish the rooms, but sometimes there are a handful I can't complete. There isn't enough time, at least not for me. At 2 p.m. or so, I have to gather trash from those main rooms again and take it out. At 2.30 I clock out. Most days I have to deep clean a bedroom. That entails wiping down the bed frame, mattress, chairs, cabinets, closets, light fixtures, bathroom and its fixtures, mini fridges, and mopping the floors.

Keep in mind, during a shift anything can happen: a spill, accident, wandering resident who wants me to take them somewhere. Or a resident who needs help and I have to run for a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant). We also deal with understaffing, inadequate conditions, time limitations, and unstocked supplies. Unfortunately for the elderly, the nursing home is never truly clean. For that to happen, we'd have to have four housekeepers on every shift 24/7. It's a wonder the elderly aren't all sick with COVID-19. Vomit, faeces, urine, and blood can be found anywhere at any given time.

As a result of dealing with water, quat, soap, floor cleaner, hand sanitizer, Purell, and gloves, my hands are raw, and spider-web cracking has bloomed across my palms and fingers. My carpal tunnel is acting up, affecting my sleeping and writing.

Monday, 23 March 2020

I've read some articles on social distancing and quarantining 'to flatten the curve.' I'd like to abide by all that, because this virus terrifies me. But I don't have the luxury of taking off, which puts my family and myself at risk. I've only worked at the nursing home for a month and they expect me to be dependable.

Gov. Holcomb issued a stay-at-home order for Indiana. Except for essential occupations. Mine is deemed essential; therefore I must continue to work. This order is in effect until 7 April, but I have a feeling it will be extended. You can't put a time limit on a virus.

Thursday, 26 March 2020

There have been many changes at work due to COVID-19. We employees must all wear a mask now. We must stay six feet apart. Some activities for the residents have been cancelled, since they can't congregate in large groups. Only a certain number can eat in the dining rooms, others must eat in their bedrooms or the halls. Their routines have been altered; their families can no longer enter the facility to visit them. Many families call, or stand outside their bedroom windows. Still, the residents persevere, knowing they have faced far more difficult times. In their faces and eyes, you can detect the hope they possess. Their memories are fading, but they still have hope.

I—and many others—will be relieved when this virus has run its course. Indiana now has some 600 diagnosed cases, and the USA has now surpassed China in the number of confirmed cases.

Saturday, 28 March 2020

I have this weekend off, which is a relief to me. You can only take so much of the stench of nursing-home urine and faeces. It's better than what it used to be when my grandparents were in nursing homes. But the smell of the bathrooms, soiled linen, spa rooms and trash can be overwhelming. It permeates my clothing and hair, and I come home reeking of it. I shower immediately. I've made it through a month at the nursing home, which is more than what I expected of myself. Coupled with the looming tension of COVID-19, sinking its black claws into our world, I'm doing fairly well.

I was talking with one of the residents yesterday. He declared, 'Never in all of my years have I seen something like this.'

'Me either,' I agreed. 'A pandemic, businesses and restaurants closing down. It reminds me of the Spanish flu, which I've read about.'

Despite one hundred years of progress in medicine and science, the result and reaction are the same.

Friday, 3 April 2020

Gov. Holcomb extended the stay-at-home order in Indiana to 19 April. I imagine by then it will be extended to May. Every day there's talk of an upcoming surge of cases to hit later this month. Experts fear COVID-19 may last into the summer.

I was frightened earlier today at work. My manager informed me I had two rooms to deep clean. No big deal. I headed there and was met by one of the other housekeepers.

‘Those residents were diagnosed with COVID-19, and one has been sent to the hospital.’

‘Okay … ’ I warily eyed those rooms. I had sworn to myself I’d quit when the virus hit the nursing home. Numbness overtook my whole body.

My co-worker grabbed two yellow gowns from the door of a nearby quarantined room and passed them to me, instructing, ‘Gown up and act as if they are quarantined rooms.’

The manager approached to diffuse the situation and assure us no one had the virus. Yet when I went to the nurses’ station later, I learned one of the residents had been quarantined in the room and was ill. I put on one of those gowns, did a deep clean, and got out of there as soon as possible. The entire time I was in panic mode.

Before lunch, my manager took me aside. ‘That resident doesn’t have the virus. The test was negative. Tensions are high and things can get blown out of proportion.’

‘What happened to the one sent to the hospital?’

‘I don’t know,’ my manager said, ‘but I don’t want anyone to be afraid to come to work. You can leave here, go to a gas station for a Coke, and get the virus there. We’re probably safer here than anywhere else.’

After lunch, I went to the nursing station to find out what to do in the second room.

‘The resident had been in the hospital, in the COVID unit and tested negative. They had to go back to the hospital for respiratory issues,’ the nurse explained.

What happened to the one sent to the hospital?

My instructions were to wear gloves and a mask while cleaning. Yet I felt uneasy and took that second gown stored in my cart, and wore it while cleaning, only taking it off when I was finished. I fear I'm reaching my breaking point.

Then I see one of the residents—they can't leave the facility. There is no running away for them. They are brave and their bravery is contagious and is infecting me quicker than any virus could.

○

Wednesday, 21 April 2020

It's been a chaotic month, but I continue to find my strength renewed each day. Not that things have been getting any easier or better, but I have faith God will bring us through in the end.

On the 15th Mom, Sean, and I each received our portion of the stimulus package—$1200 apiece. I'm going to try and save mine, for we never know what tomorrow may bring.

In the last six days, 3000 more Hoosiers[1] have been diagnosed with COVID-19. Despite all of the facts we have, the public is clamouring to have everything open again.

Gov. Holcomb will likely open Indiana back up at the beginning of May since other states are to open then. Never mind the value of human lives. If the virus mimics the Spanish flu, as many speculate, there will likely be a second wave far worse than the first. And the first isn't even over yet.

○

1 Hoosier is a nickname for those of us who live in Indiana. Despite using this nickname for nearly 200 years, the precise origins of it are unknown.

Saturday, 2 May 2020

Yesterday Gov. Holcomb announced he was lifting the stay-at-home order and opening Indiana via a five-stage phase. The goal is to have everything up and running by 4 July. Never mind that we have 18,000 infected now. I understand closing things down and the stay-at-home order was meant to slow the spread of the virus, not eradicate it. But by ending the quarantine practices, and beginning to socialise and meet in groups, COVID-19 will only manifest now. What was the point of the last couple of months if this is to be the outcome? Have we learned nothing from the Spanish flu? The second wave was worse. Do we want to be like New York? There are rumours they've had so many deaths, they've had to pile bodies in trucks and there is talk of mass graves.

The optometrist's office is opening back up and Sean will be returning to work this Tuesday. God be with her.

○

Wednesday, 6 May 2020

According to the nursing home's census, we had only sixty-four residents in-house today. Three of the rooms I take care of are empty. I finished my work before 1.20 today—there was nothing else for me to do. The other day my manager informed me we were to have a new resident move in, but under no circumstances were we housekeepers to enter that room.

Curiosity piqued, I asked another housekeeper why the new resident would be in isolation and why we wouldn't be allowed entrance. All I could think of was COVID-19.

'The resident produces contaminated droplets.' She motioned me closer and in a hushed tone said, 'One of the CNA's refused to care

for the new resident. After working here for five years, the CNA quit.'

In the staff meeting, the management promised they wouldn't accept COVID patients and that if one of our usual residents contracted it, they would tell us. Logically, it doesn't make sense why they'd bring in a COVID patient and endanger the other residents. Surely, they're testing people before they bring them in, right?

I confided to her my secret, that if COVID-19 ever came to the nursing home, I'd quit.

'Does your mother know the extent of the danger here?'

I shook my head. I have been the only one working in my household; I can't quit now.

There's talk of meat shortages, since many of the food and production plants had to close due to ill employees and contaminated meat. We are stocked up for now. I intend to make my own preparations. I'd like to stock up on canned goods, soups, rice, and water. Just in case.

○

Tuesday, 12 May 2020

This evening we picked up Sean from work. The second she entered the car, she announced that she'd interacted with someone who had pneumonia and the COVID antibodies. Against all logic and warnings, the individual was going about business as usual.

When Sean got home, she immediately removed her scrubs and

There's talk of meat shortages since many of the food and production plants had to close due to ill employees and contaminated meat.

showered. I washed her scrubs in an attempt to protect us all from contamination.

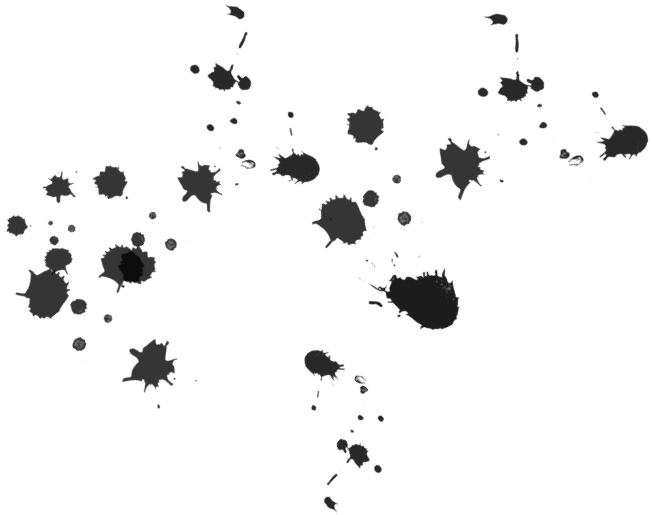
Today Indiana hit the 25,000 mark of confirmed cases. I pray Sean is not one of them.

Thursday, 14 May 2020

Sean didn't feel well yesterday and stayed home from work. She was running a temperature. Fever, chills, body aches, congestion, coughs, malaise. She stayed home today too, and, since I leave for work long before she does, I had no idea of what might transpire while I was away. Feeling poorly, she decided to go in to be tested for COVID-19. I didn't learn any of this until I got off from work, and was about to flip out because I could have carried something to the residents of the nursing home and infected everyone. I feared my actions would lead to numerous deaths, as well as my firing. Yet when I went back inside to inform the management of everything, they were nonplussed about it and assured me I could return to work for my next shift. Just as long as I didn't have a temperature or display symptoms.

Sean will find out the results tomorrow. Now we must wait.

Mom and I plan to go out early tomorrow and stock up on groceries and other necessities. That way if the results are positive, then we can quarantine ourselves here. According to the guidelines, we'd have to stay home for ten to fourteen days. I can't imagine what that'd be like. Instead of this job being the breaking of me, I think it has become the making of me. All I can think of is returning. Maybe I can become a CNA after all.



***

Veronica Leigh is a writer of fiction, essays, and articles. Some of her work has appeared in *Dark Moon Digest*, *The Scribe Magazine*, *After Dinner Conversation Magazine*, *ParAbnormal Magazine,* and *NoSleep Podcast*. She will eventually be published in *Mystery Weekly, Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, and *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*. She aspires to be a published novelist. Veronica makes her home in Indiana and she continues to work in a nursing home.

Her blog is: www.veronicaleighauthor.wordpress.com

YOU NEED A MIRACLE?

Four Short Essays About a Pub

Dan Melling

Miracles

Working the bottom bar, Kelly shouts at me from the top bar *Dan, I need a Merlot* and I mishear it as *Dan, I need a miracle* and so I shout back up *You need a miracle?* And one of the customers opposite the bar says *I need a fucking miracle* and another customer says *Me fucking too* and we're obviously all the same in that respect. I don't have any Merlot in the bottom bar and there's none in the cellar either so if whoever's drinking it is really desperate and won't drink Shiraz or Rioja or the house stuff that's labelled simply Wine (red), then they need a proper Jesus miracle which we're also completely out of. What I do have is three 10mg diazepams in my pocket, which—if I time each dose right—will make the rest of this shift pass in what will feel like minutes and that's the closest thing to a miracle I could hope for.

Storm

There was a storm tonight that none of us had ever seen anything like. *Not in Edinburgh*, Tam said, *this much lightning*. The air had been thick like a hangover for a couple of days. *It's too fucking hot*, the cook said to me. *Yeah, we need some rain*, I said. *Fuck that*, he said, *we need a decent job.* We got rain. It came down so hard and so out of nowhere that it sounded like a mechanical malfunction. The raindrops were those raindrops that are big as pebbles and bounce off the road like pebbles. There's no background music allowed now; the rain drowned out any sound. Everybody in the pub stood up. No vertical drinking allowed. They left their drinks and bunched around the doors and windows to watch. People up the street stopped where they were and stood in doorways.

Everyone in the flats across the road were at their windows, some hanging out. It was like a march or a parade or a riot was happening outside. When I was a child, I hated storms. Worrying about them took up an inordinate amount of my time. I don't know when that changed. Now I see them as a special occasion. As nature interfering with the city and its normal way of functioning, reminding us that it's still there. However much we may try to remove ourselves. I remember taking acid on a weekday morning in my old ground-floor flat next to the Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool. My friend Alex and I sat in the living room, tripping, as our housemates went in and out, living their lives. There's already something special about being outside of a normal routine. Lying on the floor with wine-stained teeth, discussing the patterns on the ceiling while all those around us went to work. It started raining, the same kind of rain as we had last night. We undressed and stood outside in just our tracksuit bottoms letting ourselves be fully immersed. There's an interview with the director Béla Tarr in which the interviewer compares him to the director Andrei Tarkovsky, particularly in their symbolic use of rain. Tarr replies: *For Tarkovsky, rain cleanses. For me, it creates mud*. The rain that day in Liverpool did both. The binmen had been on strike for a couple of weeks and our brick courtyard was piled high with rubbish. The abundance of mice and rats had attracted stray cats and the whole menagerie scattered. The rain dampened the smell but stacks of overflowing cardboard boxes lost their integrity and turned to mud. Still, it cleansed us. I could feel the rain in my bone marrow, in my sinuses. Every drop cooled me internally. Every stone-sized tear vibrated through me. It was too hard to see with my face to the sky, but I could feel Alex next to me. I could feel the red-wine crust dissolving from my lips. Regardless of whether it cleansed or created mud, it created something. A liminal moment outside of normal time. An occasion special enough that two grown men could stand, barely dressed, in a busy city on a weekday morning, and not have to worry about the police.

The Battle of the Boyne

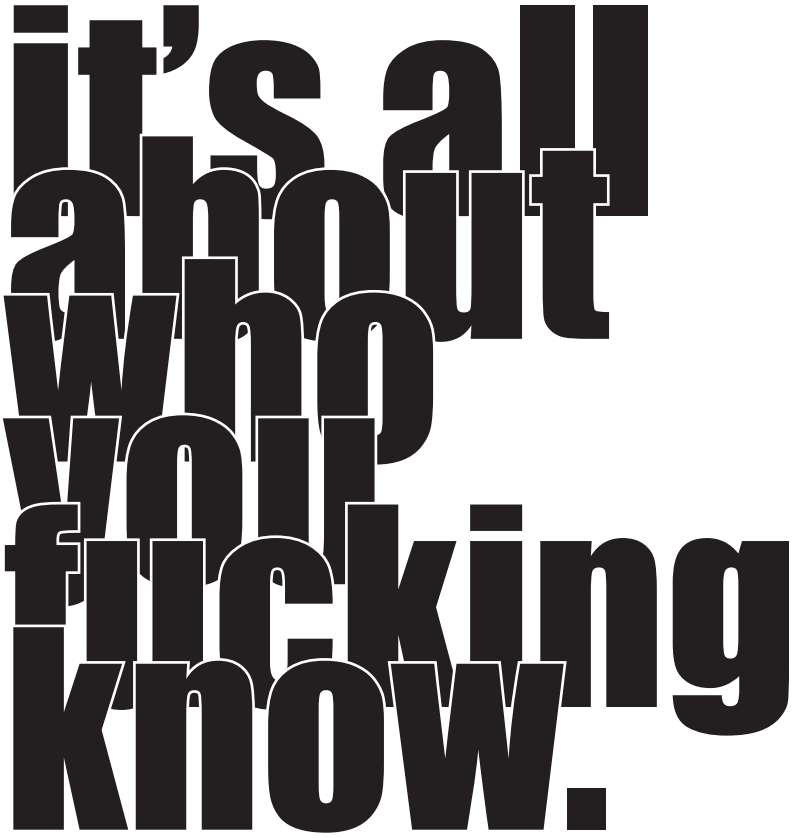
It's table service only since lockdown, no bar. Card preferred. Contactless ideally. I took the drinks over to them. £16.90 I said, and typed the numbers into the portable card machine I'd forced into my back pocket. 1690? said the man who'd indicated he'd be paying. Yeah £16.90, I said. You fucking dare come here, to me, you, English, and charge me 1690 on my card? Yeah, £16.90, I said. It was a Friday night and the sun was out. There were people sitting outside, complaining about how long they'd been waiting. Table service only. I held the card machine to him, he looked at me, right into my eyes. I'd been called in on my night off because of hangover or sickness or death in the family. He held my gaze for a second longer than was comfortable, maybe two. What's your name? Dan, I said. Dan, he said, that's a good team name. I didn't know what that meant, I still don't. I think he said team. 1690? He said, really? Yeah, that's what it is. You can't do that to me, pal. That's how much it is, mate: two Tennents, a Carling and a double vodka and Coke that's £16.90. But I can't do 1690, he said, I can't do that. That's what it is, I said. Make it £19.16, he said, and you just pocket the rest.

Pub Talk

There was a punch-up an attack whole big bar brawl the big lad threw the first punch swung at pete missed caught connected right with his head his eye his jaw his cheek took a tooth out burst his lip big outburst screamed the place down ripped off his shirt like the fucking hulk didn't even do anything really just a scratch didn't even connect but he tackled him or pete pushed him back or everyone just jumped on and it moved organically to the girls' toilets to the boys' toilets where there was no room for pete to swing a punch but pete didn't want to swing a punch he wanted to keep professional but he gave as good as he got and caught the big lad square in the nose or his hands were pinned behind his back

and everyone was there all body odour swirling and it was over in a second went the full twelve rounds it wasn't even pete just some other lad that looked like him nah of course it was and it was over so quick it was over a pint refused to serve him served him a pint in a wet glass had no head like a fucking cider dead as a doornail that pal you're dead pal but he wouldn't serve him because it was past last orders when he came in but he came in at the same time as scott but scott was there a good half hour before him and anyway we all know scott and it's all about who you fucking know and he only didn't serve him because he drinks across the road and we don't like people who drink across the road and in the road today a cat was hit by a car and it flew yeah it flew not ran flew from propulsion from the impact with the car and it landed in the smoking area all guts and blood streams from orifices and big davy got a bin liner and took it next door where the old dear cried her eyes out but kelly wouldn't let him take it in a bin liner that's a pet she loves that so he wrapped it in a towel we don't have towels he took it across in a towel wrapped in newspaper in the blue bottle bin and there was a trail of blood but the cat looked fine peaceful like it was asleep it was all mangled inside out but the old dear next door was having a fag on her doorstep when it happened and she saw ran into the smoking area in her nightdress and slippers and fluffy dressing gown and she picked it up and she was crying her eyes out and had blood all down her white gown holding onto a pile of mush an intact cat looked so peaceful and big davy wasn't even there his mum's ill so he's shielding and it was the old dear got hit by the car backed into by a truck cut in half they said dead the lad from the garage threw a tarp over her but he saw he said he saw her and it would have been alright a normal body but not that not that cut in half head missing or split torso and he got dead angry when he came in normally mild normally kind but it did something to him had to cut him off had to ask him to leave but the next day the big lad the one who threw the first punch that broke pete's nose that didn't even connect was just drinking casually across the road like nothing happened was staying at home for a bit worried

about the police but he even came in here the nerve he came in like nothing had happened he came in looking for round two he came wondering where his cat was where his wife was he came in all cattish all sheepish asking for pete so he could apologise and left with a broken nose with a six month ban with a handshake one of those new handshakes where they just touch elbows and people had something to talk about for a few days but they wouldn't say anything it's not their place and he's a hard fucker and if velásquez was alive today and living in edinburgh his bacchus would be here holding someone back holding a dead cat covered in a tarp.



Not lazy, not uninterested, but sick-to-the-stomach terrified.

Marked

Fiona McCulloch

I have an aversion to school, despite only being in Primary One. Not lazy, not uninterested, but sick-to-the-stomach terrified. School bullying by a teacher is dismal stuff. It's a severe initiation to class. I'm bullied, ostensibly for being left-handed, cos persecutors like a veneer of semi-authenticity, even if a tad anachronistic for the 70s. Still, latent British eugenics remains on her side about producing the finest subjects or some shite. She's also about a century old, or so it seems to this five-year-old diminutive wreck. Presumably she hankered for the good-old-days of Victorian brutality when there was no need to cloak it in any kind of passable for-the-child's-own-good liberal nonsense.

Her hidden curriculum balked at the menace of poverty and shyness and, with the piercing surveillance of her bespectacled, magnified eyes, mibbe she sensed my latent lesbianism. Being an interloper in Tory-town, where even its council tenants articulate themselves in Standard English to soften their Scottish accents, couldn't help either. Beat it out the wee bastard, scar her, normalise her, crush her to a shadow self. But even moulding me anew wouldn't assuage her tangible distaste.

Fear accentuates shyness—who's gonna volunteer to answer a question in class if its potential incorrectness unleashes a ruler's crack against tiny left-handed knuckles? My middle finger, crushed in an accident as a toddler, rages against her enthusiastic blows. But keeping a low profile never worked; I was on her radar and any excuse could inflame, unbidden, a barely-concealed loathing. It disassembled a young child's potential to the point of unravelling. Like a hound gulping the scented air in gleeful pursuit of its quarry,

my introverted disposition promised to stoke her bloated bloodlust in a crushing victory against that hesitant inconsequential.

Enter the aberration to a class full of confident, often affluent, children from apparently stable families. My free school meal ticket crumpled in my mind's eye, diminished by its inherent disjuncture. To make matters worse, there was a shortage of teachers and I got her for two whole years. Welcome news for all: Wednesday's child is broken. Time runs slowly in childhood—if blissful summer holidays seemed endless, another year was a life sentence.

Fear eventually bubbles over and permeates life beyond class. On the walk home from school my mother asks, 'Whit's wrang, hen?' to my brooding silence. After several denials of anything amiss, as my brain calculated how much worse it would be for me if the teacher knew I'd grassed, my persistent mother cracks me and all those months of torment come flooding out. I remember still. Not the word-for-word memory, but the moment. The sick, petrified feeling tinged with relieved unburdening to an adult, to my mother. Like present tense overwriting past participles, pain's palimpsest, an indelible.

But mothers don't always unconditionally love, so I couldn't gauge if I'd be blamed or believed, and her reactions tended to verge on the unpredictable. People are more than one thing. She championed my cause: 'Naebody lays a haun on anythin belangin tae me.' A product of her, I was her property so any infringement became an ownership issue. But she made a formidable enemy and it was protection. Exhaling for the first time in a year, I sheltered in the safety of belief even as my eyes spilled out scalding tears. Torture leaves its permanent stain, an effluent echo stamped on each passing year.

After I'd safely confided my torment and named my assailant, my mother went to the GP, who wrote a letter declaring that left-

handers' brains work from the right to left hemispheres and I should not be disciplined or forced to write with my other hand. Then my mother had a meeting with the headmaster. 'If Mrs C— lays another hand on my child, I'll bring her up on assault charges,' she warned with affectations of grandeur. Assurances were given, apologies offered. Given the right opportunities, she would have made an effective orator or criminal lawyer; she often hankered for a good argument. He assured her I wouldn't be hit again, though I do remember being slapped on the back of the legs once afterwards, but I was confused because the horrid teacher gave other grounds for the punishment so, to my childish reasoning, I couldn't confide in my mum because it wasn't about left-handedness. Limited in the amount of violence she could inflict, this appalling ambassador of primary education used other tricks.

She put me in remedial reading, and my new peers had learning impairments, none of which applied to me. Shame weighed further on my tiny shoulders. Bad enough the endless torment and violence, but now she had struck a blow against my strongest asset. Pride in my reading vanished in a teary blur. I could not fathom why I was relentlessly humiliated by this teacher. At that fledgling age, a child cannot imagine life not always being the way it is. I was singled out, an oddity to be despised; she encouraged her class of perfect children to feel the same disdain for me. Like some waif they must expunge, not part of the class. It unsettled my centre of gravity and defied logic to my impressionable mind. At which point did I plummet through space and time to inhabit this uncanny illogical wonderland? If I'm not the same, who am I? Wearing the exact same school uniform as them was irrelevant. Cleaned, buffed, and polished by a house-proud mother, yet the mark of the outlier remained. Drowning in a pool of tears wouldn't change it. Each new day beckoned another unpredictable tyranny. Off with her head! Or at least fuck it up as much as possible before she's even seven and beyond this teacher's clutches. Despite my middle name, I can't be Alice, so I must be down-at-heel Mabel with all those awful lessons.

Luckily, remedial reading proved to be a momentary weekly respite from an otherwise infernal daily existence. The deputy head running it, a lovely woman, quickly realised I shouldn't be there, so she had me reading several pages ahead of the group. She explained this to my mother and agreed I was a great reader when my mother spoke to her about how good my reading was at home. The deputy head assured my mother that I should not be in remedial reading class at all. Fuck knows how that malicious teacher got away with all of that harassment, but her colleagues probably just put it down to her generation. Even so, complicity is standing by and allowing malevolence to flourish. Doing nothing simply emboldened this tyrant. My mother's intervention could only reach so far—unless an institution holds wrongdoers to account, cycles of abusive power will exponentially perpetuate unchecked. Nowadays, it would be a lawsuit. Her cruel reign would be toppled; her powerful fury extinguished and unveiled as empty; she and her classroom made nothing but a pack of cards. Her shrinkage of me would be broken and I'd grow unrestrained and uncoerced. But it wasn't a story and I wasn't fictional, despite her best efforts to wrong-foot and up-end my authenticity. 'Because I'm not myself, you see.' She was a vindictive, evil bastard. And canny.

Not long before I was heading into Primary Three, this discordant queen of hearts started putting gold stars on my work and praising my vast improvement. She even had a sequined fish I made for art displayed in the local teacher-training college as an example of children's talent. Having dished out daily torture, she now took credit for my apparent progress. Moron to maestro—abracafuckindabra! That way when my new teacher got me, she wouldn't suspect I'd actually been highly competent all along. But her conjuring trick didn't fool me. I knew her new-found support was just as treacherous as her familiar torment. Its creeping, simpering presence unnerved me more, and I watched for telltale signs that it might unravel, triggering an acute backlash of venom against me.

Her insincere agenda sickened me, though it keenly awakened me to the game-playing delight taken by some adults in authority. Not imaginative childhood games, but carnivalesque terrors that worm like a spectre beneath your carefree years and wear you down with nightmares, so you become wizened with unnamed trauma. A distorting hall of mirrors reflecting an unknown preternatural self. Wisened and wizened. Was the glass superimposing her withered visage onto my youth, her mephitic presence putrefying me from the inside out so I couldn't distinguish where I began and she ended? Buried alive. Nosferatu. Doppelganger. Her shrivelled, disembodied head and yellowing grin suspended just beyond peripheral vision, an unwelcome accompanying harbinger on life's ever-narrowing pathway.

So that was my introduction to school, which is supposed to be equipping a child to engage with the social world. For any child to be so vindictively undermined that their sense of self is completely depleted must inevitably impede and detrimentally impact upon their neurobiological development. I had grown a shell and crawled so far into it that I wanted to be invisible and pass without attention. Like all shells, though, its fragility amplified low self-esteem in an already sensitive being, and secured a punitive entrapped essence. Too much attention still unnerves me. Neuroplasticity reminds us the brain can be remapped, but it's hard to reroute entrenched neurological pathways charted in one's childhood. Without adequate support, childhood bullying indelibly remains; a blight on our formative years, it is adulthood's revenant.

If education is a precious period to encourage curiosity, creativity, progress, cognitive development, and a joy of learning, then that cannot be reserved for an exclusive, privileged childhood ideal feted in the eyes of its gatekeepers. Such malevolent phantasmagoria loads the dice from the get-go, normalises inequality, and perpetuates an ostracised minority who are afraid to strive for better, to look up at the stars in case they are despised for getting

ideas above their station. It's the stay in your lane, who-do-they-think-they-are brigade. What are they afraid of—justice, equality, enlightenment, happy fulfilled citizens? Too utopian, you tut. Can never be done. Well, not with a rigged system, it can't. They want us growing, but not up. Read their tabloids, swallow their shite, don't ask questions. What is lost is a capacity to interrogate our reality.

That teacher was straight out of a Victorian novel, casting me as Jane Eyre or Oliver Twist, the unwanted poor, a jarring irregularity in her perfect class of smiley, privileged children. Gradgrind squeezing the imagination out of Sissy. How far have we transcended those archaic views? Do they haunt us still? The left-hander, that changeling devil-child. Sinistral, shy, sapphic—in bygone times she'd have danced round my pyre, its agonising flames bouncing off her rapacious glare. Smite thy enemy, cleanse the herd. My sinistral outward sign meant a blot on my inner soul. My card was marked from the get-go. What an injustice to inflict on a five-year-old wean. What an immense breach of adult power. An unforgivable offence.

My fifty-one-year-old self still feels that terror, that shame, that insecurity, that pain, and wishes she could turn back to hug her inner child, soothe that wee five-year-old, and tell her to be present, to take up her rightful space on this earth, not to allow judgemental hypocritical tyrants to erase her. To find out as a five-year-old that the world is not a safe place is acutely unsettling, and leaves you afraid of growing, of being. A child can't forget a treacherous adult: time may blur the minutiae of daily events, but never the indelible imprint of trauma and fear. The biggest act of defiance, though, is to reject their confining narrative and tell our own stories. To exorcise a spectral grip stilling our tongues, we must articulate resistant narratives.

What an injustice to inflict on a five-year-old wean. What an immense breach of adult power. An unforgivable offence.

***

Fiona McCulloch grew up in Scotland in a working-class household and is currently a disillusioned independent scholar adrift in a neoliberal precariat. She works as an ad hoc literature tutor for City Lit. As well as several critical publications in books and peer-reviewed journals, her emergent creative work includes '2020 Vision', 'Funeral Rites', 'That Brecks It', 'Miscommunication' (*Dreich*, forthcoming); 'Pride' and 'Requiem' (www.mironline.org/poetrypriderequiem); 'Aye Swear' (*Lumpen*, Issue 5); 'Love' and 'Magpie' (*Northwords*, Issue 3).

write a funny poem about failure

(hahaha)

Brilliant

Jen Herron

I read a book about a guy
who ran five iron mans in five days.

So I bought new trainers
and a pack of Quorn,
did well for a bit,
but by the end of the month,
I was back in front of the TV
eating shite.

Then I thought,
write a funny poem about failure
(hahaha)
to mask the fact that I'm dying inside,
because another year has passed
where I've done sweet fuck all but want
someone else's life.

Maybe if I had a lover,
we'd go running
and have picnics with tofu
after tantric sex,
and we'd talk long into the night
about all the things we'd do.

I'd be so zen;
I'd reach my true potential,
have that movie moment
when I finally do
something/anything
worth writing about.

or else

I must come to terms
with being ordinary,
which *I suppose isn't too bad,
and I pray to god
or anyone who will listen
please let me do just
one important thing.
(*everything is lies)

***

Jen Herron is a teacher and writer from Larne, Northern Ireland.
Twitter: @_jenherron

Working-Class Lives in 1980s Peckham

Learning from the Peckham Publishing Project (PPP)

Amy Todd

The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers[1] started as a network of working-class writing groups in the late twentieth century in the UK, supporting groups across the country to write and publish their own stories. In the British context, the Federation was created in the late 1970s in London, to address the need to see and share stories of working-class people and their experiences, at a time when working-class identity was under attack.

There are two competing origin stories of the Federation, each showing the intention of the organisation. One tells the story of the teacher, Chris Searle and the creation of *Stepney Words*[2]—a collection of his students' poetry, published against his employer's wishes. The other was a coming together of working-class writing groups across the country, again showing the importance of solidarity and collectivism in creating and publishing the material. Class struggle and solidarity, particularly expressed through the written word, was not only understood historically by the Federation but overtly stated in their origin story. From its origin, the Federation understood its work as part of the corpus of working-class literacy output and the applications and importance of this work in changing the political landscape. This was at the forefront of the members' minds at a time when working-class identity was coming under attack: 'we understood that when a dying culture can no longer provide any hope for living in a different way ... the working-class movement had seen the need to take on the direct responsibility for making a new culture'.[3]

Their inclusive take on class analysis was explained as an 'understanding of a collective identity open to revision and

1 www.fwwcp-dc.org

2 Chris Searle, 'The Story of Stepney Words'*, Race & Class, 58.4 (2017), pp 57–75 (see https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396816686281)*

3 Jennifer Harding et al., *Alliances, Assemblages, and Affects: Three Moments of Building Collective Working-Class Literacies*, 2018, p 24

expansion—a working-class identity without guarantees'.[4] Both groups and individuals can apply to be published through the Federation today, as was the case in earlier decades, with a clear understanding of the importance of intersectional identity.

> To become members of the Federation, a group contacts the Executive Committee (a body of seven elected members voted to take account of regional representation and a balance of women and men) … The main criterion used in deciding whether or not to accept groups into the Federation is whether they are genuinely self-organising and not encouraged into being and still controlled externally within some kind of community development or education programme.

The Peckham Publishing Project[5] started in 1977 as an early FWWCP group with an aim to:

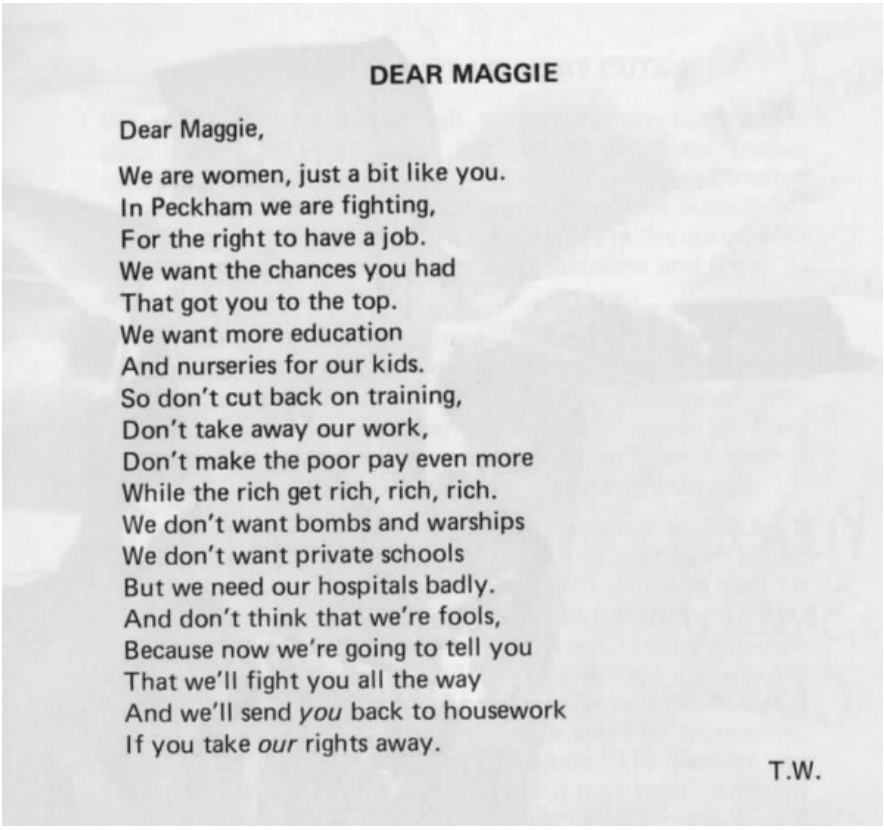
> Produce books by and for people in Southwark as an integral part of work at The Bookplace, Peckham's community bookshop … The group has regular monthly meetings to make decisions. Work sessions on individual books are organised as necessary. The members are local people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and occupations … To March '82, twelve books have been published, with particular emphasis on writing by women, school students, Black people and old people … Publishing policy is actively anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-fascist and open to all local people on this basis.[6]

4 Ibid, p 24

5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bookplace

6 *I Want to Write It Down: Writing by Women in Peckham*, London: Peckham Publishing Project, 1980

Texts from the Archive: I Want to Write it Down: Writing by Women in Peckham



DEAR MAGGIE

Dear Maggie,

We are women, just a bit like you.
In Peckham we are fighting,
For the right to have a job.
We want the chances you had
That got you to the top.
We want more education
And nurseries for our kids.
So don't cut back on training,
Don't take away our work,
Don't make the poor pay even more
While the rich get rich, rich, rich.
We don't want bombs and warships
We don't want private schools
But we need our hospitals badly.
And don't think that we're fools,
Because now we're going to tell you
That we'll fight you all the way
And we'll send *you* back to housework
If you take *our* rights away.

T.W.

Credit: Peckham Publishing Project and the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, *I Want to Write it Down*, p 1

Thatcher worked hard to make sure 'working-class' conjured up images of the grey, depressing, homogenous blob of the 1950s where there was no sense of individuality, no social mobility, no choice. Her rhetoric tied the Soviets and the Miners together as 'the enemy within', with collectivism as the common denominator, sapping up personal liberties. The Federation and the collections 'challenge overly deterministic accounts of the rise of individualism, which assume that affluence and the aspiration to better oneself

necessarily meant disregarding others and rejecting the claims of community' as Jon Lawrence explains. This first work is a great example of this: individual accounts and entries but printed collectively under the banner of women who want to share their words. In the introduction alone we can see the politicised message expressed by the group for the publication.

The women talk openly about the poverty and housing crisis experienced by the diverse group—which bind their experience in their locality. They also address the lack of formal education available to the women in their adult literacy class setting. It was the lack of qualifications and opportunities which in part led to the creation of this book—women across Peckham had come together to learn and better their prospects, which due to cuts to adult education and with soaring unemployment, were now under threat. It is clear that these women not only thought it important that their experiences be heard, but also that they showcase their new-found education and put it to political use in support of their right to education and work. This is evident in the first page of the publication which starts with a poem directly addressed to the prime minister accusing her of cuts to education. In 'Dear Maggie', one of the writers pleads with the prime minister for the right to an education in order to get better paid employment and refers to the class barriers that working-class women in Peckham face—as opposed to those who 'had the chances you had'. Joanna Bourke explains that because of the oppression resulting from their gendered class experience, 'Women were much more sensitive to class distinctions than men' and by reading these writings, we see the intersection of gender, class and race in detail. After all, growing unemployment hit hard in the decade, but the hardest hit were West Indian women: 'Unemployment, then, not only tended to hit West Indians harder than any other ethnic group, it also hit West Indian women workers harder than other women workers.'[7] And with the large West Indian community in south-east London—these women in Peckham were aware of this.

7 Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain,* London: Gower, 1987

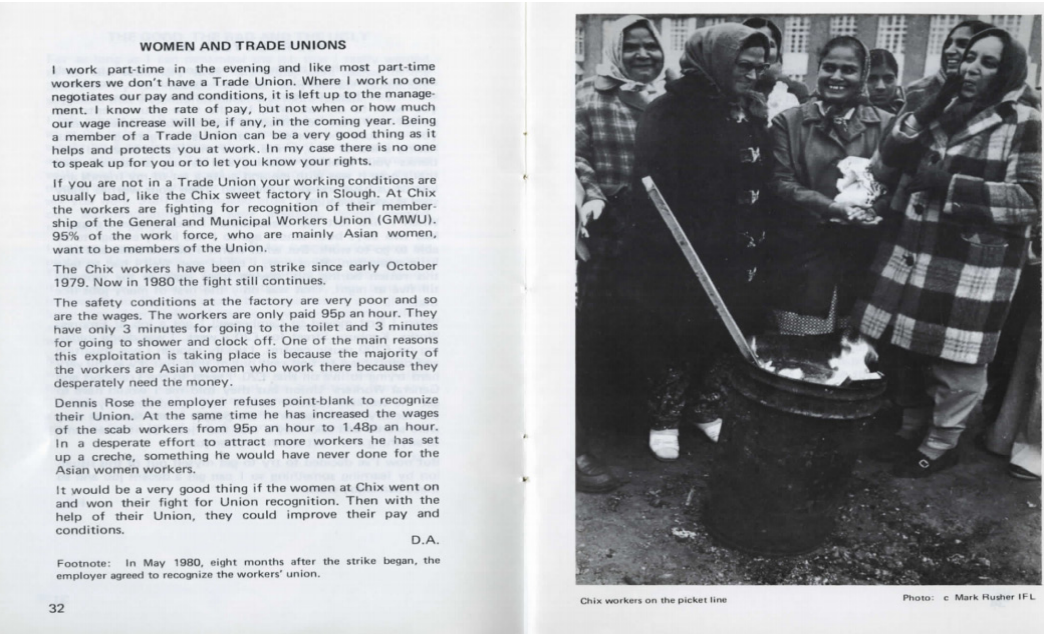
Women make up 40% of the workforce of Britain.

Women still earn, on average, just two thirds of men's hourly earnings. The gap has got wider in the last three years.

Most women work in traditional "women's jobs". These are mainly unskilled and low paid.

Credit: Peckham Publishing Project and the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, *I Want to Write it Down*, p 4

The 'Women and Trade Unions' piece explains that because more women are part-time workers, in order to work whilst raising children, they are not represented appropriately and therefore, many are exploited in the workplace. This account references the Chix sweet factory and the Asian women strikers opposing low pay and terrible working conditions. Sociologist Paul Gilroy explains that the intersection between class and other characteristics must be applied to a modern evolution of class identity which is successful in this diverse collection of women coming together to write collectively under the Federation's working-class banner, 'Class analysis must be opened up so that it can be supplemented by additional categories which reflect different histories of subordination as well as the historical and moral elements Marx identified as determining different values for different types of labour power.' These writings opened up the Federation's accounts of working-class experience in the decade by intersecting class experience with race and gender.



WOMEN AND TRADE UNIONS

I work part-time in the evening and like most part-time workers we don't have a Trade Union. Where I work no one negotiates our pay and conditions, it is left up to the management. I know the rate of pay, but not when or how much our wage increase will be, if any, in the coming year. Being a member of a Trade Union can be a very good thing as it helps and protects you at work. In my case there is no one to speak up for you or to let you know your rights.

If you are not in a Trade Union your working conditions are usually bad, like the Chix sweet factory in Slough. At Chix the workers are fighting for recognition of their membership of the General and Municipal Workers Union (GMWU). 95% of the work force, who are mainly Asian women, want to be members of the Union.

The Chix workers have been on strike since early October 1979. Now in 1980 the fight still continues.

The safety conditions at the factory are very poor and so are the wages. The workers are only paid 95p an hour. They have only 3 minutes for going to the toilet and 3 minutes for going to shower and clock off. One of the main reasons this exploitation is taking place is because the majority of the workers are Asian women who work there because they desperately need the money.

Dennis Rose the employer refuses point-blank to recognize their Union. At the same time he has increased the wages of the scab workers from 95p an hour to 1.48p an hour. In a desperate effort to attract more workers he has set up a creche, something he would have never done for the Asian women workers.

It would be a very good thing if the women at Chix went on and won their fight for Union recognition. Then with the help of their Union, they could improve their pay and conditions.

D.A.

Footnote: In May 1980, eight months after the strike began, the employer agreed to recognize the workers' union.

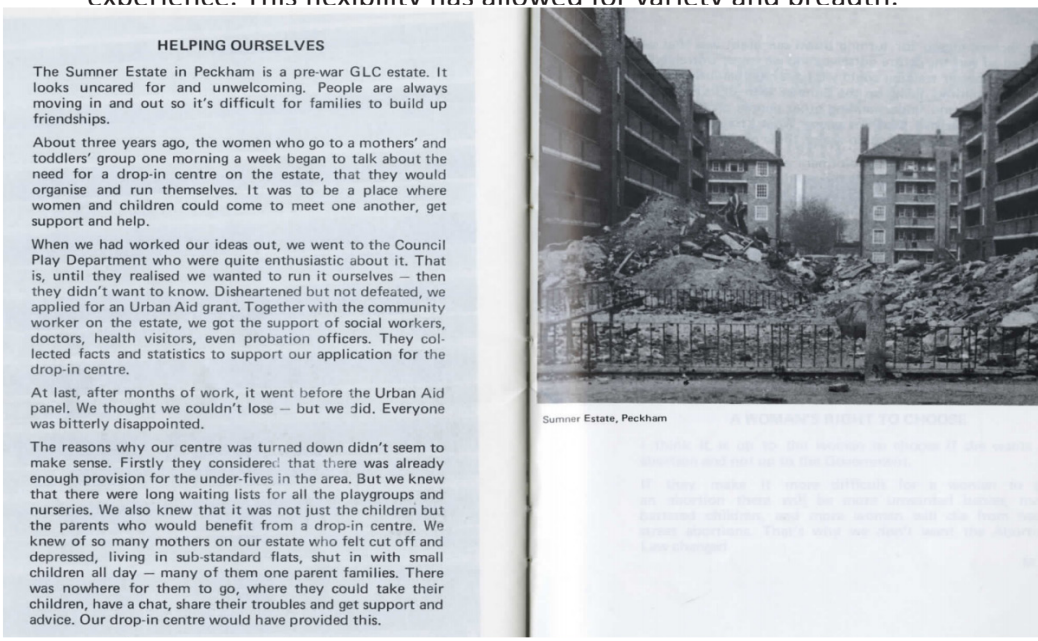
32

Chix workers on the picket line

Photo: c Mark Rusher IFL

Credit: Peckham Publishing Project and the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, *I Want to Write it Down*, p 12

Writing together and publishing the work collectively as an act of activism itself was clearly strengthened by many of the women's other activist work outside of their writing groups. For example, we hear an account of the women of the Mothers and Toddlers group on the Sumner estate who contacted the council to campaign for funding for a drop-in centre on the estate for those who had 'nowhere to go … shut in with small families all day, many of them single parents'. They were later denied funding for their project but they encouraged other women to do the same. This focus on the language of community is a product of the decade and an example of the 'in between' that Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite talks about. The Federation always stated explicitly that its mission was not to prescribe to any strict sense of 'working class' and that the material created was not a complete expression of working-class experience. This flexibility has allowed for variety and breadth.



HELPING OURSELVES

The Sumner Estate in Peckham is a pre-war GLC estate. It looks uncared for and unwelcoming. People are always moving in and out so it's difficult for families to build up friendships.

About three years ago, the women who go to a mothers' and toddlers' group one morning a week began to talk about the need for a drop-in centre on the estate, that they would organise and run themselves. It was to be a place where women and children could come to meet one another, get support and help.

When we had worked our ideas out, we went to the Council Play Department who were quite enthusiastic about it. That is, until they realised we wanted to run it ourselves – then they didn't want to know. Disheartened but not defeated, we applied for an Urban Aid grant. Together with the community worker on the estate, we got the support of social workers, doctors, health visitors, even probation officers. They collected facts and statistics to support our application for the drop-in centre.

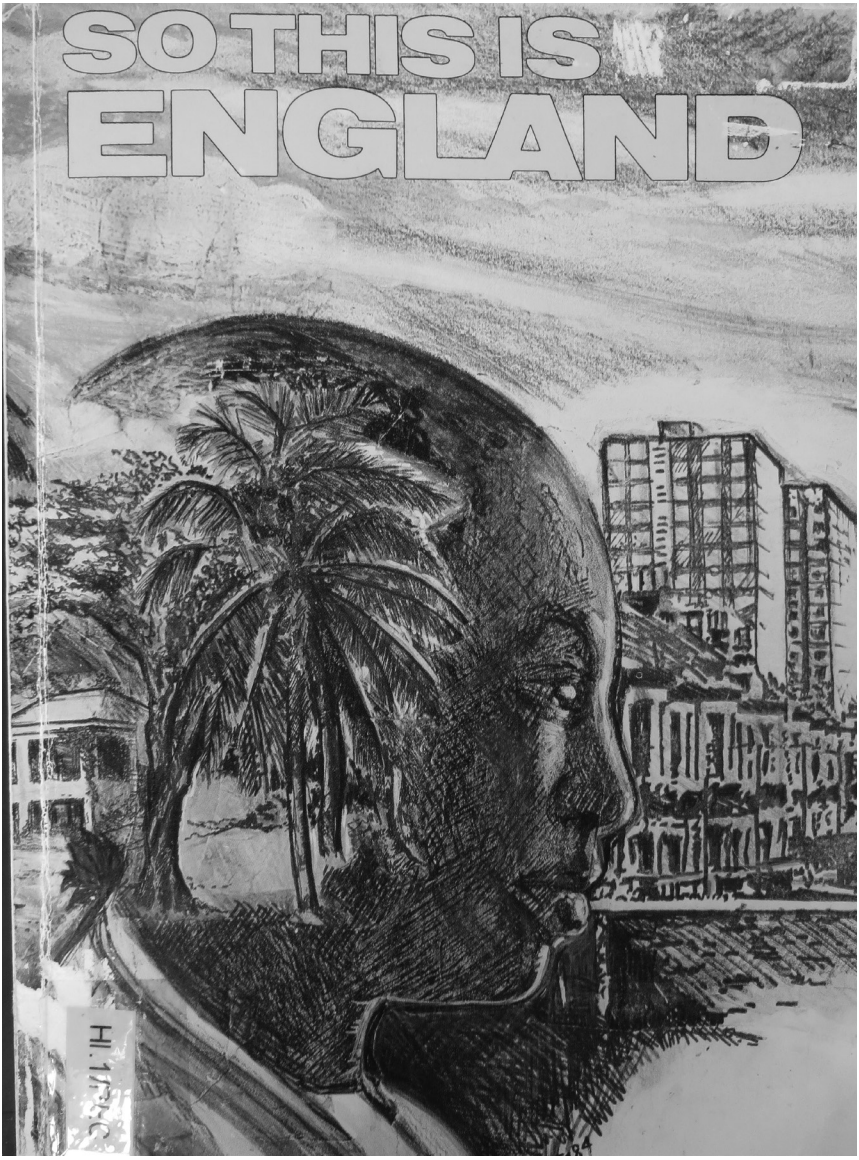
At last, after months of work, it went before the Urban Aid panel. We thought we couldn't lose – but we did. Everyone was bitterly disappointed.

The reasons why our centre was turned down didn't seem to make sense. Firstly they considered that there was already enough provision for the under-fives in the area. But we knew that there were long waiting lists for all the playgroups and nurseries. We also knew that it was not just the children but the parents who would benefit from a drop-in centre. We knew of so many mothers on our estate who felt cut off and depressed, living in sub-standard flats, shut in with small children all day – many of them one parent families. There was nowhere for them to go, where they could take their children, have a chat, share their troubles and get support and advice. Our drop-in centre would have provided this.

Sumner Estate, Peckham

Credit: Peckham Publishing Project and the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, *I Want to Write it Down.*

Texts from the Archive: So This Is England



Credit: Peckham Publishing Project and the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers.

This collection of work showcases the migration narratives of Peckham residents from across the world. Again inspired by an adult education course delivered by South East London College, students came together collectively to write and publish their experiences. The book is separated into sections—'Coming to England', 'Housing', 'Schooldays' and 'Memories' which shows the group's own decision-making in topics most pressing to their experience in moving to and living in London. Class is inherent in the material in the publication—whether or not the writers would have identified as working class in their native countries; once in the UK they were treated as, and experienced life in the country as, working-class people—valued only, and exploited, for their labour. Experiencing class identity, as Carolyn Steedman describes, 'not only as a structure of feeling that arises from the relationship of people to other people … but which is also an understanding of the world … a proper envy of those who possess what one has been denied'.[8]

Joseph Olubo speaks of this denial in 'My Return', about moving back to Nigeria briefly as a child and comparing this experience with that of living in London. 'Perhaps now, in England, where people live close together, yet so privately, so isolated, this seems a claustrophobic situation, but it was a way that shared so much—responsibilities, problems, joy and grief.'[9] On his return to London to live with his Irish mother, leaving his Yoruba father back in Nigeria, Joseph finds London 'unutterably alien' and laments the loss of a community where he feels experiences are shared and importantly where to be Black was natural, not a disgrace—expressing his experiences of racism not through personal attacks but through the holistic experience of not being accepted because of the colour of his skin.

8 Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, London: Virago, 1986, p 123

9 So This Is England, London: *Peckham Publishing Project*, 1984, p 12

Family bonds being broken and strengthened, being away from family and loved ones, and re-uniting is another theme inherent throughout the works. Lorna Morris talks frankly about her childhood and the difficulty in getting to know her mother in her youth after being brought up in Jamaica by her wider family. Veronica Isaacs talks about the difficulty in forming a relationship with her mother, 'I had a vision of a mother loving, full of tender kisses for me, but instead of that mother, I received no kisses, no embrace, no warmth of welcome, no feeling of appreciation. A feeling of total isolation enveloped me.'[10] Like Carolyn Steedman, with her description of her experience of her working-class childhood, she explains her mother had no love to give them and thanks God she never pretended what she did not feel. This acts as a counterpoint to the many working-class narratives that martyr the mother and give the false view that all working-class mothers were salt of the earth, loving and generous women, an idea more prominent in white working-class narratives reminiscing of earlier decades.

These accounts, especially from childhood perspectives and contextualising the sometimes fractured family structures, are important challenges to Thatcher's comment on Black families. As she said in response to the 1981 Brixton riots, 'Black criminality is not political but a consequence of family structures.'[11] This furthered her Conservative vision to promote 'traditional moral values' which Thatcher equated with a fabrication of Britain having a franchise on morality. It also furthered the 'otherness' stoked by Thatcher's cabinet and felt by migrants across the country in the wake of the rise of far-right racism in the period.[12] Hyacinth Durrant recalls the harrowing experience she had on searching for housing

10 Ibid, p 14

11 Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (ed), *Making Thatcher's Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p 100

12 www.independent.co.uk/hei-fi/entertainment/national-front-aims-revive-70s-glory-days-7669703.html

for herself and her children but who, due to a 'No Coloureds, No Children' rhetoric found in housing advertisements, was forced, like other migrants, into poor housing. This further reinforced an association between migrants and poor housing. Hyacinth's son was murdered by a tenant in the same building whilst she was in hospital giving birth to her daughter, 'I felt rejected by this society.'[13]

Many of the narratives show a disconnect between what they thought England was going to be like, and what England offered them once they were here. Mac Dixon, who was born in London but then spent his early childhood in Jamaica, explains that he was sent for by his parents to return to London at age eight. Expecting to 'walk on goldmines. I thought I could walk streets and pick up 50p's and all paper money and I thought I could get paper money all the time. I thought I was going to get a new suit of clothes every day and sling them away the next day.'[14] As soon as he arrives Mac decides any money he has is going to be used for his return fare but doesn't explain why—we are left to deduce that England wasn't as he expected. Phillip Hylton explains the loneliness, cold, and isolation felt as a child in London whilst his parents worked. Lack of opportunities and safety, unlike the beach, river, or cane walks of Jamaica, led to children experiencing the poverty and class oppression felt not just by their parents. As Carolyn Steedman explains, this happens to working-class children being left to feel the 'economic terms' of their existence. She adds 'it is clear that many working-class children have understood these terms'.[15]

Like Madge in the piece, 'Looking Back', it seems many of the accounts show they were unaware of the racial problems and prejudice rife within England when they arrived, and were shocked by the state of housing available, the cold, and the lack of sunlight.

13 *This is England*, London: Peckham Publishing Project, Peckham Publishing Project, p 8

14 Ibid, p 16

15 Steedman, Carolyn, Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives (London: Virago, 1986), p 88

Many were left wanting to return to their home countries. Jeremy Gilbert explains further, 'Notoriously, the conformist culture of Fordism found various types of cultural difference extremely difficult to tolerate: in particular, the new immigrants from the Commonwealth were expected to assimilate to 'British' ways of living, or to expect social and economic rejection from all sides.'[16] Reading these experiences, you can see consciousness of class develop in these groups, with migrant experience as a commonality, through the act of coming together to write and share common experience.

In the next piece, 'First Steps', we hear from Muriel in her emotive piece about assimilating into British life. When Muriel is perturbed by the snow, her husband, who has been living in London for a few years when Muriel arrives to join him, explains that she must 'step in where the people already step and make a way',[17] an image that suggests the life ahead for Muriel in assimilating to this new country. This epitomizes the collective experience of the writers– forced into trying to assimilate to get by in this new country, suffering under structures of oppression, like the inability to access safe housing, and derided by Thatcher and later politicians for not adhering to 'British Values'. These latter ideas echo our politics today where an intrinsic Britishness is 'defended' from the 'threat' of immigration.

Texts from the archive: Godfers

Jim Allen's account of his Bermondsey childhood states on the blurb the importance he feels about recording these stories to accompany other histories from the period. 'Their stories are not spectacular or outstanding, but if war and political intrigue are

16 www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/why-did-working-class-culture-dis-integrate-in-1980s-sort-of-reply-to-paul-mason.

17 So This Is England, London: Peckham Publishing Project, 1984, p 18

worth recording, then so are these.'[18] Jim frames his accounts as being part of an urban landscape and suggests that similar accounts can be found from across the country, telling the story of the poverty endured by families after the First World War. To this end, Jim writes in third person which gives a sense of universality to these tales and draws in the reader, especially if they also grew up in the local area–which is the intended audience of the PPP's resources. Because of this Jim can tell the wealth of stories found on his one street from perspectives of different members of the family.

Three publications in the work of the PPP talk about their experience of this conflict and the ramifications of the war on British society in the 1920s. To read such vivid testimonies of living through this period today is rare. Outside of living memory–there is much more focus on the Second World War after which the public enjoyed the prosperity of the 1950s. In direct opposition, the decade following the First World War left families with 'wages being low and working hours long; the reward of parents for winning World War One'.[19] Jim's characters experience personally the impact of poverty in their daily lives, from lack of food and the death of children on the street, to the lack of fathers in local families. Throughout the stories, children are not spared the responsibilities, horrors and harsh realities that come with a working-class life on the breadline. In the 'Fireworks and Fish' chapter, the author shares the 'Thursday atmosphere' experienced every week when everything had been pawned, all the food had been eaten, but hope, in the form of Friday payday, was around the corner. In the piece entitled 'The Grotto Season' we hear about the second occurrence of grotto—making in texts from the PPP, whereby young children would create attractive displays on the pavements in order to secure loose change from passersby. A young girl adds in a photograph she finds in her house to brighten the display on the loose understanding it

18 Jim Allen, *Godfers,* London: Peckham Publishing Project, 1984, back cover

19 ibid, back cover

is of her father—though she had never met him as he had died in the war. When a passerby recognises the photograph and gives her sixpence, she is overwhelmed not just with the money but with the realisation for the first time that she'd lost a father to the conflict, 'she did something no child should do during Grotto Season—she cried'.[20]

Jim introduces the experiences of mothers on the street through 'Mother's Medal'. Like in *I Want to Write it Down*, we see again evidence of women being more sensitive to class distinctions than men due to the impact they had on their daily lives looking after the family. 'Let her wash her blankets, trousers, shirts, sheets, nappies, towels—everything I do in the scullery … wonder if she'd smile then.'[21] states one mother when musing over a glamorous advert in a magazine. These are the same magazines she had to borrow from a neighbour in exchange for potato peelings for her pets, which she gets her son to exchange, with the proviso that he must also state that she apologises if she has caused any offence. Apologising for the poverty experienced by her family, which she has no control over, shows the rituals of respectability that working-class families were forced to adopt in order to assimilate themselves to other classes without falling into the 'underclass'. As Sarah Attfield explains, 'Many working-class people have aspired to respectability—maintaining cleanliness in the home, presenting an image of "niceness" through neat modes of dress, or speaking "proper". This respectability is intended to show those in power that working-class people are worthy of their attention and assistance.'[22]

Unpacking these accounts as a historical source, throws up some interesting aspects of the material, format, and the organisation

20 Ibid, p 6

21 Ibid, p 7

22 Sarah Attfield, 'Rejecting Respectability: On Being Unapologetically Working Class', *Journal of Working Class Studie*s, 1.1 December 2016, p 13

itself. The main theme of *Godfers* and many of the texts of the PPP is of memories of childhood, and mothers in particular feature heavily in most of the recollections. A chronological retelling of one's life is a well-known, established, and almost 'legitimate' feeling way of telling your experience, backed up by hundreds of years of literary tradition. Because of this there is a definite emphasis given to these formative years by the writers. Sometimes this childlike perspective can skew what we can learn about the experience historically—as opposed to if we could hear the account of the mother herself, for example, where we might hear an altogether different view of some of the particularly good or bad times. The founding members of the Federation further critically discuss this issue in the material created in a historiographical context and the focus on nostalgia and the issues arising from that.

> It goes back to a long historical discussion about the way that cultures get frozen in the diaspora. When people go looking for the most authentic version of the Childe ballads from Scotland they find them in the Appalachians; to find the most authentic Irish music, go to Chicago, don't go to Dublin.[23]

The poverty experienced and the political disenfranchisement felt by working-class communities after the First World War can be seen distilled here in the voices of working-class people from south-east London—even writing decades afterwards. There is a strong sense of solidarity created between the reader and the text because of the emotional accounts and the impact of poverty on these communities. Reading them we can experience a little of the collective experience in writing and publishing these materials together—it must have created and built up a strong sense of the experience of class these authors felt. Acknowledging the tumultuous times of the present decade, and relating these earlier struggles of the working class highlights the similarity of

23 Harding et al*., Alliances*

the conditions experienced and gives us an idea of how to help working-class solidarity to flourish.

Put plainly, this work is relevant today. Conversations about structural racism, colonialism, the history of immigration and people of colour in Britain, sexism in the workplace, social cleansing—these are all issues that are at the top of the agenda for those who make social justice their business today. It is these same themes that dominate the work of the PPP and the wider Federation in the 1980s. It is written so those who lived through the era do not forget, and those born after understand how little change there has been when it comes to the working-class struggle, and for them to see how change happens, how long it takes and how this affects different people based on their characteristics. This interpretation of recent history is important in an era where more people have no lived experience of alternative ideologies in government and where unregulated privatisation, capitalism, and neoliberal ideology seem to have put many people in a situation where they cannot imagine an alternative. The writing from the PPP can inform debates around Black Lives Matter today as it shows the experience of the Windrush generation and the intentional destruction of class identity in these communities and other working-class communities by Thatcher's government. These lessons can all be learnt through the words, stories, and poems from working-class people themselves in the archive and could offer alternatives for collective action in the future. 'Institutional life aggregates people or disperses them, moulds group identities and draws people into settings in which collective action can erupt.'[24]

Honest accounts of difficult family relationships, abject poverty that can't be hidden, and mothers that were not the martyrs that many working-class narratives depict are all here. They widen the

24 Harding et al., *Alliances* p 8

genre of working-class life stories and challenge the division within class identity of those deserving of support—a working-class identity without guarantees. Out of this I hope that the research works towards a more contemporary re-imagining of working-class identity that fits our world today, as even though the language of class might not be as strong a tool to mobilise social action, the injuries of class are still deeply entrenched. As Jon Lawrence explains, 'Community hasn't died, but it has changed.'[25] Inspired by the FWWCP's redefining of class to fit their era, there may be hope to do the same in 2021.

***

Amy Todd is a sort of historian. She grew up between Scunthorpe and Doncaster before moving to London to study, as the first person in her family to go to university. She recently finished her MA in Public History at Birkbeck after last studying history at age thirteen. She is the programme manager of the Newington Green Meeting House: Revolutionary Ideas project sharing the history of radical thought in North London.

25 Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England*, 1st edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p 45

Bibliography

Harding, Jennifer, Jessica Pauszek, Steve Parks, and Nicholas Pollard, '*Alliances, Assemblages, and Affects: Three Moments of Building Collective Working-Class Literacies*', (http://repository.londonmet.ac.uk/3371/1/e6-29-Sept18-CCC.pdf, 2018)

Maguire, Paddy, Dave Morley, and Ken Worpole, *The Republic of Letters: Working Class Writing and Local Publishing,* London: Comedia Pub Group, 1982

Lawrence, Jon, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England*, 1st edn,Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019

Gray, Richard, '"History Is What You Want to Say..." Publishing People's History: The Experience of Peckham People's History Group Oral History*', Oral History and Community Projects,* 12, 2, Autumn, 1984

I Want to Write It Down: Writing by Women in Peckham, London: Peckham Publishing Project, 1980

Bourke, Joanna, *Working Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity,* London and New York: Routledge, 1994

Gilroy, Paul, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* London and New York: Routledge, 2002

Hilton, Matthew, Chris Moores, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *'New Times Revisited: Britain in the 1980s'*, *Contemporary British History*, 31, 2, 2017, pp 145–65

So This Is England, London: Peckham Publishing Project, 1984

Jackson, Ben and Robert Saunders, *Making Thatcher's Britain,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012

Steedman, Carolyn, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* London: Virago, 1986

Allen, Jim, *Godfers,* London: Peckham Publishing Project, 1984

mothers that were not the martyrs that many working-class narratives depict

Songs of the English Working Class
An interview with Matt Travers

Songs of the English Working Class/The Making of Experience is a book of collages made by Matt Travers. Matt Travers uses excerpts from his late mother's diaries and places them in and amongst William Blake's illustrations from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. You can find excerpts of this collection on both the inside of the front and back cover of this issue, and the rest of it on our blog at www.theclassworkproject.com. Below is a QA with Matt Travers to tell us more about the collection and to help the rest of you understand why we think it's lovely.

1. Can you tell us about yourself?

I work as a high-school teacher in Denmark, and after living here for eleven years I've just about got my head around the language and have started doing a bit of translation on the side. Together with my girlfriend, we've published translations of Yahya Hassan, Caspar Eric, Inger Christensen and Rudolf Broby Johansen: the

first two being contemporary Danish radical poets, the last two being part of the Danish literary canon as well as card-carrying communists their whole lives. Like my mum, I have also made a point of writing every day, even if it is just my diary. My mother worked in a textile mill before becoming a home help, and my dad was on the tractor production line at David Brown's, which later became CASE—before moving its main factories out of the UK for good. Neither of them went to school beyond fifteen. Both of them read fairly widely for pleasure and had rich inner lives. Basically, I come from the northern working class, even though I left Huddersfield at three, even though Tony Blair's widening of university access meant I could borrow my way into a degree, which has since enabled me to enjoy this comparatively plush middle-class white-collar work in Denmark.

There's a point early on in Susan Sontag's diaries where she justifies reading her lover's diary by claiming, 'one of the main (social) functions of a journal or diary is precisely to be read furtively by other people, the people (like parents + lovers) about whom one has been cruelly honest only in the journal'. For me there's always been elements of exhibitionism and betrayal and shame in my writing. All part of the fun. I wouldn't want to write this off as some kind of working-class imposter syndrome. I think the power of writing comes from articulating what can't be said otherwise, by anyone else.

2. Can you tell us about your mother and your relationship with her?

The story of how I obtained my mum's diaries might answer this. When I was a baby, my mum had something like what we'd now medicalise as post-natal depression and she wasn't a fan of my dad being at work in a factory for ten, twelve, hours a day. So one evening, holding me in her arms, in a moment of anger she cried out, 'Well, you bloody take him then!' which my dad promptly did, and kept me at his older sister's for six weeks. My mum tried to get

the police involved to get me back, but at that time they couldn't do anything until the case had gone to court. My mum was truly distraught and went down to five stone in weight, and then one day managed to sneak into my aunt's and steal me back while the baby-sitter wasn't paying attention.

My dad gave me these diaries about six years back, when his health wasn't at its best, and for that I am seriously grateful. He'd kept hold of them for over thirty years after having originally taken them to use as evidence in the custody case for me against my mum. Whether they were actually read in court I don't know. I can only imagine they spoke in her favour. At any rate, she was granted full custody rights over me, but allowed my dad to have access in the school holidays anyway, which she didn't have to do. I didn't know these diaries existed until my dad gave them to me, so reading them so many years after she died was probably the closest I've ever come to a spiritual experience.

3. Can you tell us about why you put together this book of work, and where it came from?

The *Songs of the English Working Class/The Making of Experience* came from an experiment with collage. I'd been trying to set myself two hours a day on top of my full-time teaching to work on creative writing, and I was having a phase of working with blackout and cento poems, where basically you either eliminate text from an existing page to make your own point with someone else's words (blackout), or you just cut up and rearrange found phrases to your own liking (cento). What's good about this sort of poetry for me is that it seems to free you from the pressure of having to come up with your own perfect phrases, and the strange resulting layout on the page allows you to not take yourself too seriously. I had brought my mother's diary to my school that day—it was the diary where I first make an appearance—and I had also taken my

copy of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, the classic Pelican paperback edition which has this illustration of a marvellously elegant Yorkshire collier from the early 1800s with a walking stick and pipe, who holds a wicker basket on his forearm like a handbag. (1) Aside from writing this seminal historical work on English class, E. P. Thompson was also a massive William Blake fan, and his last work was a historical biography of Blake in the context of English Methodist's radical tradition. At some subconscious level it must have struck me that both of these canonical English writers were trying to reveal something which my mother's diaries could do unforced in the few minutes or so she set aside to write each day. Where Thompson wanted to synthesise and articulate the resistant working-class voices from the very beginning of industrial capitalism in Yorkshire, Blake, in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, projects a sort of beatific innocence onto the lowliest, who were willing to put up with their lot. (2) More simply, where Thompson's history focuses on the defiant nobility of the working classes, you could be forgiven for thinking Blake makes the poorest of the poor martyrs for good. Both of them were trying to counteract working-class stereotypes of their day—of being historically passive, or morally repugnant—but how well did either of them really know my working class mother? Someone who was neither innocent nor obviously rebellious to historical circumstance, but who managed to carve out a life with its fair share of joys and modest successes anyway? After deciding on which diary entries I wanted to use and which Blake plates (that is, these illustrated engravings on which his poems were first etched) might pair up with them. A couple of hours with glue, scissors and the photocopier did the rest.

4. What was the significance of collaging it with William Blake's illustrations? Where are they from? What is the significance of these illustrations for you?

In a silly way, I wanted to out-Blake Blake. One interpretation of his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* collection is that he does a

kind of punk move on the literary tradition, consciously taking on nursery rhymes and the fable form in order to show how popular culture might contain a profound affirmative revolutionary animus or sort of messianic power. Blake was also the first poet I learned by heart, mainly because there are some short ones, and my interest was no doubt influenced by my mother's love of the film, *Educating Rita*, which has a memorable scene where Julia Walters, playing a working-class Open University student, unpleasantly surprises her professor by being able to recite Blake's 'The Sick Rose' from memory. (3) Yet there's also a kind of inevitable faint melancholic distance between Blake's attempts to evoke the life of the poor and uneducated with the skills and talents of someone who is highly skilled, well-read, and fairly well-connected to the London art-world of his time. On the surface, at least, Blake seems to unapologetically romanticise them. Worse, they are burdened with the weight of being supernaturally virtuous. What would the chimney sweeper really say? Or the little Black boy? Or the nurse? How would they articulate their experience directly? It is curious to imagine what might have happened if Blake had access to a tape recorder. Perhaps my mum's diary writing, which completely fills out the small format of the pages and relies on her own idea of what counts as standard punctuation and spelling, was the perfect style to capture her actual life. As if her short sentences beginning with a verb in past tense and ending on the object ('Done washing.' 'Hoovered stairs.' 'Got paid.' 'Bought sandals.') best conveyed the challenge of the continual housework and economising involved in raising three small children on little money, and what must be a sense of pride in managing to keep afloat. Then, as with the euphoric edge in Blake's 'Songs of Innocence', there are these especially poignant moments which break through her constricted style where she takes the time to describe a moment of delight in her children or recount what had amused or disturbed her that day. So that's the reason why I crudely plastered in her days—cut out into strange stanza forms—with their distinctive handwriting, across the copperplate verses of Blake, still leaving 'a lip' of his

poem visible so that they can't be ignored; but not so expertly done that I could be accused of ventriloquising her voice (at least not as much as has been said of Thompson's fierce workers). (4) To cover the poetry of Blake with my mum's diary is to suggest that her experience of working-class life is at least as valid as his, but it should also evoke a sense of loss. We miss the fiery vividness of Blake's imagery, but it's a poetry that can only be produced in circumstances unlike my mother's. As the child of working-class parents, parents who were not moral paragons in any conventional sense, I wanted to be able to say something about their lives in a way which didn't filter it through my years of university education or my knowledge of the English literary canon.

5. Why did you decide to send it to *Lumpen?*

I learned about *Lumpen* a year or so back after signing up for the addictive rat-trap that is Twitter, and then discovered The Class Work Project and read D Hunter's penetrating investigations into the realities of class-consciousness. As well as being a fantastic storyteller, it was clear to me that he had really lived in these criminalised milieus, which I was on the periphery of in my late teens, the details of which I don't have the same courage to expose. And I liked the way he was able to articulate the voice of those who might get spoken for by the 'betters' on the left or right and do so in a way that wasn't sentimental. Instead, I felt he really got how those on the margins of society can be best equipped to see through the hypocrisy of some of the holier-than-thou 'correct position' activist movements often run by middle-class people with PhDs and good intentions. Because these working-class people on the outside of academia have no 'return ticket' when the politics get boring, they often have a better understanding of the need for more urgent, wider social change.

I think that everyone, whatever their class background, is creative, but I think it is naïve or disingenuous to imagine that there are

no educational barriers to appreciating William Blake's poetry or to reading E. P. Thompson's *The Making of The English Working Classes* all the way through. These are barriers that can be overcome—through projects such as *Lumpen*, and platforms and organisations that give space to deconstructing blocks that people may have to writing and literature. But I think there is a risk that we are currently living in a political climate where working-class access to higher education is in decline. This should be shocking, but instead it seems to be accepted as inevitable, and in its place the radical left has a faint hope that the educational deficit can be made up for by worker's initiatives or small-scale charitable projects. I am all for these consciousness-raising groups, especially *Lumpen* obviously, and I learned at least as much about political theory from being a long-term attendee of Debra Benita Shaw's 'Radical Theory Group' in London (5) as I did in my master's degree in critical theory, but the idea that you can replace the latter with the former for me gives up too much to those in power. Why give up the means of large-scale intellectual reproduction that is a modern university factory for the equivalent of a workshop?

6. Do you think you'll do more of this type of work or was it specifically relevant to this particular moment?

In terms of collage work then yes, definitely; it is the art of people who can't write or draw but keep going anyway. I probably won't do anything so direct with my mum's diaries because *Songs of the English Working Classes/The Making of Experience* is one of the few things I've put together which I feel pleased with, and I am sure that has something to do with it being a fluke. If I tried it again, it'd lose some of its ritual/ceremonial qualities. But there is a ton of material in these diaries which interests me and I would like to work with in some other way. Some kind of history project perhaps. What I like most about them is the sheer intensity of life: constant work, out late every weekend, love and grief arriving at all times.

Notes

1. E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is a landmark work of social history which meticulously researched legal and government archives in order to capture both the incredible hardship (e.g. the fact that men would do a twelve-hour labour shift on little more than a crust of bread) and the many, many instances of active working-class resistance to the new factory regime of early industrial capitalism. Working-class agency in this period was rarely given much scope in historical accounts before E. P Thompson's study, which aims to shift focus on to what 'makes' the English working class. For Thompson, this 'making' is largely through acts of resistance to harsh working conditions. My *Songs …* emphasises social reproduction, literally, through the family, and the everyday heroics of making ends meet, and the happiness which comes from doing so.

2. William Blake's *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789-1794) is a sequence of illustrated engraved poems or 'plates' produced in the context of the French Revolution, and can be said to express support for that cause by showing how the poor are systematically oppressed and how nobility of soul is universal. My *Songs …* uses online facsimiles of the original plates in the following order: the title cover, 'Little Black Boy (second plate)', 'The Lamb', 'The Ecchoing Green', 'The Chimney Sweeper', 'A Little Boy Lost', 'The Shepherd', the frontispiece for the 'Songs of Experience' division, 'Infant Sorrow', and 'Little Black Boy (first plate)'.

3. Lewis Gilbert's Academy Award-winning film adaptation of the Willy Russell play *Educating Rita* is largely driven by the familiar story of how a mature working-class woman can work her way out of economic and culturally impoverished circumstances through self-study. One of the more interesting sequences in the film is where the professor is dismayed by his working-class student's adoption of a blithe university attitude, which in his ears sounds

pretentious and 'shrill', as if nothing could be as ugly as a working-class person trying to pass themselves off as academic. Just as academic jargon can be the means of obscuring crude or confused thought, the middle-class disdain for anything which isn't in clear no-nonsense plain English can be used as a repressive instrument to stifle attempts at learning. My *Songs ...* retains my mother's idiosyncratic spellings, grammar and strong Yorkshire dialect as a means of placing professional readers in a position of discomfort: how do you decipher the handwriting? What use is comparison to Blake or John Clare if it only results in assimilating her voice into that of the establishment?

4. Given its central importance in social history, it is no surprise that E. P Thompson's *The Making of The English Working Class* has been subjected to many critiques, ranging from its limited treatment of women to its over-reliance on unquantifiable accounts of workers' subjective experience. However, arguably one of its main challenges has been in the accusation that it functions as a special form of middle-class condescension, wherein working-class voices and experiences are somewhat fetishised and reconstructed according to the needs of highly educated university professors with a political programme.

5. The London-based Radical Theory Group was initially set up by Jeremy Gilbert and facilitated for a decade or so in the 2000s by Debra Benita Shaw. Its basic premise was to have open-ended discussions about political thinkers who were rarely studied in universities (e.g. Fourier to Sade, or from Abiezer Coppe to Lautréamont) in a climate which was welcoming and friendly to people outside of academia. They always took place in squatted buildings, occupied university departments or anarchist social centres and were equally convivial and combative in nature.

1976
Christine Sharp
PEPYS
DIARY

Kiss My Proletarian Arse

Eugene Egan

Where are they taking me? It's so dark. How much further? The car slows down then halts for a few moments as the security barrier rises to let us through. We drive on through and follow the narrow lane. It looks like a woodland, with so many trees. It's like a forest. It feels eerie. Don't let it get to you.

What was that poem? The one by Kipling. How does it go again? If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you? Yes, that's the one. Triumph over adversity. Keep strong. It will be okay.

At last the car pulls up and the doctor and police officer get out, so I get out too. A gust of wind takes me by surprise. I steady myself and pull my rucksack tighter round my back and shoulders to gain some warmth. A dark-haired woman holding a clipboard is waiting at the entrance. She greets the doctor and police officer and beckons us to come through. They talk, like I'm invisible, and the doctor hands her some notes and a file. Minutes pass before the doctor and police officer say goodbye and leave me alone with her.

She reads the file and glances over at me. 'Come this way, Michael,' she says, turning for me to follow. She swipes her security pass and we go through another set of doors that lead to reception. 'Wait here,' she says. 'Someone will be with you in a minute.' The woman disappears behind a door which states 'Staff Only'.

Whilst I wait, there's a man lying on the floor. He's topless and without footwear. He keeps crying and

muttering to himself—something about being the son of God; that's all I can understand. I avoid making eye contact with him.

A few minutes later, a young and chubby-looking Black man, wearing large black-rimmed glasses, appears from the staffroom and introduces himself to me as Ben. 'Come with me,' he says, leading me into what looks like a locker room, without much in it except a small table.

'Have you anything sharp like razors or nail-clippers on you?'

I pull my wallet out along with my keys and mobile phone and place them on the table. Then I empty my pockets of loose change and place that beside them.

'I need to take your belt too, please.'

I remove my belt and hand it to him. He puts the keys and belt in a clear plastic bag, telling me I can keep the wallet with the loose change and mobile phone.

'I need to search your bag.'

I take off my rucksack and unzip it. He looks inside and spots the mobile charger and confiscates that too.

'I'll put the charger in the staff room. It needs to have a health and safety check. You can have it back in the morning.'

Now I'm worried, as my phone has died and I need to call my sister, Patricia. He pats me down and tells me to wait while he puts my things in a locker.

Ben takes me on a short tour of the block and then shows me to my room. 'This is where you'll be staying whilst you're with us.

You don't have to stay in your room. You can join the others if you wish. It's not a prison. If you want to go back to your room, just ask a member of staff and they will let you in,' he says. 'The doors self-lock. It's to stop other people from entering your room and stealing your belongings.' He smiles, trying to reassure me and leaves me alone to unpack my stuff.

There's a bed with a little cabinet and a wardrobe. The door has one of those spyholes, like the one in the police cell, but you can't see much just the door opposite. The window is locked.

I unpack my belongings and put them away and lie down on the bed. I'm feeling restless, so I venture out to see what's going on. I walk down the corridor, past the staff room and into a large common room where I can see others milling about. It's supper time, so I go to the hatch where an elderly thin woman is serving. I grab a mug of tea and a slice of toast. I'm conscious of other people around me who are acting strange and looking weird. I drink the tea and pretend to watch television on the large, flat screen whilst waiting for my medication. A queue begins to form, so I join it and wait in line.

'How did you get here?' asks a shaven-headed man standing in front of me. 'Did the police bring you here?'

'Yeah, they took me from the police station. Said I need help.'

'My name's Joe. Don't worry, you'll get used to the place.'

It's now my turn. I step inside and they ask me to sit down. The chair is in the centre of the room. I feel like I'm at the dentist waiting to have a tooth pulled out.

The assistant is a serious-looking woman in her thirties. She asks me my name and date of birth. She checks my file and shows it to

her colleague. He nods and she goes to the cabinet and takes out a small plastic cup, fills it with water and hands it to me with two little tablets. With trembling hands I take the tiny cup of water and swallow the tablets. I say thanks and return to watching television with the others.

There's that man again; he's still on the floor shouting. There's another man dressed in a black tracksuit with white stripes down his sleeves. He keeps circling the room and pacing up and down the corridor wearing headphones and doing press-ups. Joe tells me that the man running around is a former soldier. 'PTSD,' he says. 'Poor bastard was in Afghanistan and Iraq. Something over there sent him a bit crazy.'

Need to get back to my room. The medication is kicking in. A stout and very severe-looking woman in her fifties guides me to my room. She unlocks the heavy metal door with a key that she keeps with a big bunch of keys by her side.

In the morning I get out of bed and get dressed. I peer through the window and can see a courtyard with a leafless tree in the middle. There's a magpie hopping about the place but not much else. It's raining outside.

There is a rap on the door and a loud voice informs me it's breakfast time. I'm hungry, but first I need my charger. I knock on the 'Staff Only' door. Nobody answers—perhaps they're busy or they haven't heard me. So I knock louder. Somebody opens the door and asks me what I want. 'My phone and charger. Ben, the care assistant, took it from me when I came here last night.' He stares at me, momentarily. 'What's your name?' he asks.

'Michael Ryan.'

He closes the door and comes back a few seconds later with the charger. I thank him and head for the canteen.

After breakfast, I lie down on the bed and shut my eyes. It's dark and peaceful, but then, without warning, a piercing horrible scream reverberates around me. 'What the hell was that?' I wonder, leaping from the bed. A cold sensation shimmers up my legs and arms. Pull yourself together I tell myself. It goes silent again and I lie back down on the bed. Some moments later, another loud and painful scream can be heard. I advance towards the door but dare not open it. I listen, with my ear to the door, but only an eerie silence can be heard. I grab my headphones and lie back down on the bed. After a while I remove them. The screaming has stopped. I'm curious to know where the screams have come from, but I remain inside the room.

I'm reading *Strumpet City* by James Plunkett, a novel set in Dublin during the 1913 Great Lockout. Joe lent me it.

Someone raps the door and unlocks it. A thick-set man puts his head round the door and informs me it's lunchtime. I don't really want to leave the room but I need to eat and now I'm thirsty too.

I join the queue. I have a salad sandwich with an apple and some juice. I sit down at the table where there is a group of men sitting down having their lunch. A couple of them are talking to themselves. There's a Black man who's sitting opposite me. He keeps laughing to himself. His face, neck and arms are horribly burned. He's topless, as the heat from the central heating system is prickly and stifling.

'Was it him,' I wonder, 'that made the loud piercing screams earlier?' The stout-looking woman in her fifties tells him to cover up and put his top back on. She glances over at me and asks if I'm okay. I just nod my head.

Rashers Tierney is navigating the streets of Dublin, scavenging for food amongst the bins of the respectable and well-fed classes. The

kids are jeering him and pelting him with stones, but he just keeps going.

There's a loud knock on the door. It's the stout-looking woman, 'The doctor is here to see you now, Michael.'

She leads me to the doctor's room where there's a clean-shaven man with jet-black hair sitting at a desk peering at a computer. He's sporting a clean white shirt with a black tie and there's a briefcase beside him. There's a bible on the desk.

He gestures for me to sit down.

'So how are you feeling today, Michael?'

'I'm okay, I guess,' avoiding eye contact.

'Have you had any thoughts of suicide or self-harm?' he asks.

'No,' shrugging my shoulders.

'How is the medication going?'

'The zopiclone helps me sleep. That's it.'

'What about the cannabis?' raising his eyebrows.

I want to tell the smug twat to kiss my proletarian arse but manage to restrain myself and just shake my head.

'No, nothing like that,' I respond.

'How are you finding it here?'

'There's nothing to do. I spend most of the time in my room reading.'

‘So you like reading?’ he says, nodding his head. ‘That’s good. Have you anything you want to ask me?’

‘No, nothing I can think of at this moment.’

‘Fine, then I’ll see you next week.’

It’s teatime at St George’s and I’ve been here a week. All the chaos and characters in this place stop me dwelling on what brought me here. I wait in the queue at the hatch with the others. It’s Friday, which means fish and chips. I have it with mushy peas and wash it down with a mug of tea.

The laughing Black man with the burns is sitting opposite me again. I smile and he smiles back. His name is Leon, he says. He likes poetry and invites me to his room. He shows me the poems he’s been writing.

‘They’re very good,’ I say. ‘You’ve got a talent there, don't waste it.’ Leon grins and says he’s going to get them published and when he’s a rich man he’ll remember me. I leave him to it and wander back to the common room where there’s an elderly man shuffling about talking to himself. The shabbily dressed figure asks me for a fag but I can’t help him as I’ve given up smoking. He tells me his name is John. He has no family and lives on the streets. I think about Rashers Tierney, the destitute character in *Strumpet City* wandering the streets of Dublin.

I’m adjusting to the routine and trying to watch television with the others. Nobody is taking much notice of what’s on the screen. Most of them look bored with nothing to do so they just wander around aimlessly. There’s an Asian guy in his twenties who keeps gambolling over the furniture and annoying the hell out of everybody. He approaches me and repeatedly shakes my hand.

With all the chaos and characters in this place it stops me dwelling on what brought me here

‘What’s your name?’ he asks.

‘Michael.’

‘I’m Mo,’ he says, then returns to gambolling over the sofa. ‘You want to play table tennis with me?’

‘No, thanks, it’s not my thing mate,’ I reply.

He can’t sit still and talks to himself or to anyone who cares to listen.

‘You sure you don’t want a game?’ he asks again.

‘Yeah, I’m sure,’ I say, sitting down on one of the chairs in a forlorn attempt to watch television without interruption.

It’s eight o’clock, time for soup and bread. It’s hectic and there’s a buzz of activity in the air. Joe tells me this is because the medication is wearing off, so everybody is becoming lively. The night-staff are on high alert too. It transpires that the keys to the drugs cabinet have gone missing. They start panicking and everyone’s room is searched. There’s a young man romping about the place naked. He arrived an hour ago. Members of staff surround the confused man and take him back to his room. Panic over: the keys have been found.

There’s a new admission. His name is Peter and he was taken here last night. He’s only been here five minutes and he’s doing our heads in. The atmosphere is tense. He’s been taking too much sherbet. He’s walking round the common room with a towel wrapped around his head looking for people to bully.

‘My father is an important politician in Kenya. When he hears what you’ve been doing, there will be trouble,’ he roars.

'Sit down and be quiet please, people are watching television,' pleads one of the tired staff, who just wants to get home after a long shift.

'I went to sleep last night with a plaster on my arse and when I woke up it was gone. One of you came into my room last night and removed the plaster from my arse! They injected me with cocaine,' he says, staring at the staff member who told him to be quiet.

Peter is upset that nobody is listening. He wants my help and beckons me over to listen to the conversation he's having with the police on the phone.

'Do you think I'm lying or mad?' he asks, turning towards me. 'Speak to these people for me. Tell them what they're doing to me, please.' He hands me the phone.

'Who am I talking to?' asks the police officer.

'Michael.'

'May I ask where you're calling from?

'Yes, St George's psychiatric unit.'

'May I suggest your friend talks to his doctor.' The call ends.

I eventually manage to detach myself from Peter by retiring to my room and continue with my reading. The novel allows me to escape from all the madness. It takes me back to the harsh world of Rashers Tierney. I stop reading to reflect on the Miners' Strike during the Thatcher period. Then, in Birmingham, before the factories closed down, we had jobs and a social life. The comparisons with that time are uncanny. I think about the devastation of deindustrialisation and the broken communities left behind. I reflect on the rising

She wanted to know what happened. I don't remember too much, I told her. Only that I went home and someone upset me. I just lost the head. I wanted to die and make everyone happy.

tide of deprivation and despair that has engulfed our communities with suicides and the broken people who try to find solace and comfort through alcohol and drugs. I think about the people here too, trying to swim the choppy waters of life whilst drowning in a sea of despair.

It's been a long day and now it's time to queue up for my medication. I take it and know it will soon kick in, so I ask one of the assistants to return me to my room. I undress and get into bed and finally fall asleep.

My support worker, Jenny, called me today. She wanted to know what happened. 'I don't remember too much,' I told her. 'Only that I went home and someone upset me. I just lost the head. I wanted to die and make everyone happy.'

Three weeks have passed. Peter's gone. They took him away last night. Joe's been discharged. The homeless man is still asking for fags and Leon's got new friends.

'I'm not just a poet,' he says, 'I'm an android, too.'

'Look out the window,' he says, pointing to the sky. 'It's a UFO. My friends are looking out for me.'

'You're a special guy. I can't see anything,' I tell him.

Ben's really cool. He's been making me feel safe and telling me I'm a good person. He even let me go out for an hour today so I could go to the shops. I managed to buy some proper razors, as the ones they give you here cut you to shreds. I let them know I have the razors, so they can put them safely away in the locker room. I just ask them in the morning for my razor, so I am able to have a decent shave then hand it back. They trust me now.

Tonight I'm going to the theatre. They've given me permission to see David Hare's play *The Judas Kiss*. It's about Oscar Wilde's downfall when he was betrayed by his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, and sent to Reading Gaol.

As promised I return from the performance on time and well before midnight without any problems. Ben's on duty. He presses the buzzer to let me through.

'Did you enjoy your play?' Ben asks.

'Yeah, I did, mate,' with a big grin across my face.

There's a new consultant come to see me. Her name's Heidi. She's from Germany and asks me about my interests in reading and literature.

'Are you enjoying the book, Michael?' asks the fresh-faced young woman, dressed casually but smartly.

'Yes,' I reply with a smile. 'It gives you somewhere to go when you have to stay where you are.' I tell her about poor Rashers Tierney, and his skinny dog, Rusty, as he stumbles along the streets of Dublin whilst scavenging for food and playing his tin whistle to make a few bob so he can feed himself and his faithful companion.

'Maybe you could start a reading group or something,' she says, 'so you can use your skills and insight to help others.' She continued, 'Would you like to speak to Tracie about setting up a group?'

'Yeah, I'm interested? Who's Tracie?'

'She works for our Service User Engagement team. I'll get her to give you a call. She's looking for someone to help set up a creative writing and literature group within the Trust.'

She's very warm and friendly and has taken an interest in what keeps me well. She's made an impression and has said I can be discharged next week, if I've got somewhere to stay. I tell her I will ask my sister.

The meeting with the new consultant has put a spring in my step. Things are on the up and Patricia is coming to visit me. I've not seen her since I've been here, and I really miss her.

Lunch is over and everyone is milling about aimlessly. Mo is still gambolling about all over the furniture and annoying everyone. He keeps interrupting me every time I try to read. It's difficult to concentrate and talk to people at the same time.

'There's someone here to see you, Michael,' Ben says with a wide grin. I jump to my feet as he leads me to the visiting room.

'How's it going, bro?' she asks.

'I'm good,' I reply, nodding my head.

'I've got a book for you,' she says, leaning across the table.

I take it from her. It's *The Odyssey* by Homer. It tells the story of a Greek legend, Odysseus, and his ten-year journey to return home, as he battles with monsters and god-like creatures along the way. It's a story of resilience and endurance.

'Tracie from the Service User Engagement team called yesterday. I'm meeting her next week to discuss co-facilitating a creative writing and reading group with the community mental health team.'

'Excellent, bro, you can stay with me when you get discharged. If that's what you want?'

‘Yeah, well, Heidi says I’m well enough to be discharged. She said I can go home on Friday.’

‘Great. Do you want me to pick you up?’

‘Yeah, sure. Is that alright with you?’

‘Yes, of course. I’ll pick you up on Friday. Give me a call when you know what time they’re releasing you.’

The strikers returned to work and Rashers Tierney and his dog, Rusty, are dead. The priest said it was too late to give him the last rites as his body had lain there for several days. The rats had had a feast too.

My sister’s visit has cheered me up and now I can look forward to discharge on Friday. ‘It’s a relief,’ I told her, ‘that I don’t have to return to the hostel with all the bullying and drinking. I’ll be able to sleep in peace without someone pounding my door every night demanding things from me and insisting I join them for a drink.’ My nerves were shot to bits in that place. There’s a new dawn on the horizon.

There's a new dawn on the horizon.

***

Eugene Egan was born in 1963 into an Irish working-class family in Balsall Heath, Birmingham. His father emigrated from Limerick City in the late fifties to Birmingham where he settled and met Eugene's mother. Eugene works for the Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust as a peer support worker and uses his lived experience of mental distress to support people who are transitioning from acute mental health settings into the community. He enjoys reading literature and writing short stories. Eugene is a socialist and member of the Workers Party of Britain and is on Facebook and Twitter as @EugeneEgan8

NO BOTHER

Dom Hale

When I can't look up from the pavement and the world
cycles are pressing us in, rain of analysis;
it's daft I've never written a poem for you.
People in hi-vis jackets are digging all along the Walk
and therefore pretty preoccupied, understandably unfocused
on a sky-grand Parthian shot I'm doing up.
What life I have is in my poems.
Tastes good, no cult of succumbing in cinema air, mates aren't far
and under the false clouds of the Tourmalet where I'd find you for a drink.
Calamity will kill us, doubtless, sure
it dawns on you at once that's how things usually go in books
but this is the shit we got up for, way out north, knowing no grace
structure of my flowing tongue.
Shapes which are a world imposed on this, a line of yours sails through
perpetual war and proxy war. Crushing bluntness
'meeting the needs of the workforce' and no one you care about exempt
from reduction to a flickering number in a bank account,
their grafting sapped, anger placated
by the distorting lies of media and compelled shopping.
When did I write my first poem? I can't even remember;
it was that long ago. Meet me there, waking speech no discipline

trying to love every damaged or resented thing
on the needle's point of antipathy entirely
until the day I die. Gets so illuminated, greenish, lively—someone's sacked past

throws up kittiwakes breaking from the Tyne Bridge,
which is not any real or true or sacred kind of relief.
Open hinge of Dagda under the laughter of the planets,
that lapwing on your shoulder;
I'm rammed into a packet, I am drained
into a gainful uniform. What insists is slipping off down Boroughloch
though mind-tired, overweight from alcohol.
My life is in my poems
feeling rare through drunk magenta of the slowing night
and I don't need anything else.

Dom Hale is a poet from Blackpool currently living in Scotland. He is the author of the poetry books *Civilian Lyrics* (Veer 2021), *Scammer* (the87press 2020) and *Firewall* (Distance No Object 2020). Before the pandemic he edited the magazine *Mote* and co-hosted the *JUST NOT* reading series in Edinburgh. He is now helping to organise a mutual aid fund for UK-based poets at www.poetshardshipfunduk.com and co-editing the magazine *Ludd Gang*.

The Importance Of Personal Hygiene.

Olie Martin

Charles had lost the job. He was caught stealing wine. Everybody did it and the bosses knew because they did it too. The real reason he lost the job was because they were cutting staff and all of Charles' colleagues had been there for longer than him.

Walking to the jobcentre to sign on, he pulled out his lucky lighter. It was a Zippo commemorating the marriage of his namesake Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana, the people's princess. All was well in Her Majesty's land he thought, and he smiled hopefully as he walked past the vacant, dreary faces of his fellow unemployed subjects before entering Hackney Jobcentre. The meeting was over

quickly. Charles was instructed to attend weekly with evidence that he was looking for work. Not a problem—he had to find work.

But first, he would meet his friend Philip at their favourite pub. It was a chain pub and it was cheap for the area. Philip was sitting in the usual spot with a pint in front of him. Charles ordered a pint and sat down opposite him.

'Sorry to hear about the job,' said Philip.

Charles gulped down half of his pint before he answered. 'Shit happens', he replied.

'Shit really does happen. What are you going to do?'

'Get a job. I have no other option.'

'Fuck that,' said Philip.

Philip sold drugs, mostly. He was a top student at UCL and had a student loan to fall back on. The two men were friends principally because they found each other challenging and both enjoyed a challenge. Beyond that, they enjoyed drink and drugs. There was nothing else that bonded them. Charles fondled the lighter in his pocket and he knew in his heart that Her Majesty's Britain wouldn't let him down. He was a loyal subject.

Over the evening, they got drunk and merry. Philip explained his plan, which was to make a living out of selling artefacts belonging to the rich and famous on eBay. It didn't matter exactly what the articles were, but they had to be authentic. Charles laughed it off as typical of Philip. They enjoyed the night and drank until the bar closed.

Charles had been unemployed for a week and the rent due date

was getting closer, so he sat by his computer desk to search for jobs. The wall behind him was covered by a painted Union Jack and had two long shelves attached to it. These shelves contained collectible royal items, such as commemorative plates, cups, and photographs. His mother had passed her obsession with the royals down to him and he viewed the royal family with the highest regard. The computer desk was littered with beer cans and overfull ashtrays, but the framed picture of the Queen looked back at him encouragingly. All would be well, Charles thought.

After checking Facebook and tossing off to some porn (having turned the picture of the Queen around), he began his daily job search in earnest. There were many positions available and he applied for them all—mostly bar work and retail. He couldn't believe his eyes when he got to page seven of the results:

- Have you ever wanted to work at Buckingham Palace?
- Fantastic opportunities available.
- No experience necessary.
  Meets minimum wage requirements.
  Send C.V. and covering letter to **********@royal.gov.uk

A spark of excitement lit up inside him and he wrote the cover letter in a flash. He wondered what the job would be. It didn't even matter—he would be living the dream. He was too excited to continue looking for jobs. He was too distracted imagining himself working at the Palace. He fantasised about meeting the Queen and getting down on one knee to offer his services. Unable to contain his animation, he called his mother.

'Our boy! Our boy at Buckingham Palace! I'm so proud!' she cried. Charles cried too.

After showering, he went for a stroll around Whitechapel and walked in the way a royal butler would. 'Yes, Your Majesty,' he repeated to himself.

'Yes, Your Majesty.'

A few days later, Charles and Philip were sharing a joint and listening to Radio 4. Charles was checking his emails, acutely aware his rent was due imminently. But there it was: an email from Buckingham Palace. Charles had butterflies.

Charles opened the email. He had been offered an interview and he couldn't believe it. A feeling of euphoria hit him. 'Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!' he screamed.

'What the fuck?' Philip asked.

Charles turned to him, grinning maniacally.

'Interview?'

'Interview at Buckingham Palace!'

Philip looked at him with disgust, before leaving the room. Charles danced with joy, accidentally breaking one of his royal decorative plates. Without noticing, he continued to dance, taking puffs on his spliff and fantasising about meeting Prince William. He imagined bringing dinner to the Queen and setting the table. The door slammed as Philip left without saying goodbye. Charles was overjoyed and called his mother, who couldn't believe it. 'Our boy! Our boy in the Palace! So proud!' she wailed in ecstasy. Charles wailed too.

After speaking to his mother, he sat down to eat a Pot Noodle and even used one of his fancy forks from the Buckingham Palace gift shop. He played 'God Save the Queen' whilst enjoying his chicken and mushroom noodles. He felt regal. Rule Britannia, he thought.

It was the day of the interview and Charles was nervous. His mother had bought him a tailored suit and he had never looked sharper.

Out of respect, he made a serious point of staying away from drugs and alcohol in the days leading up to the interview, although he had saved a bag of ketamine for a post-interview celebration, or otherwise, depending on the outcome.

At St. James' Palace, he spoke to a rude desk secretary who gave him directions to the interview room. Outside the room, there were two rows of chairs, with two other candidates sitting in them: a middle-aged woman who looked like a poor Margaret Thatcher and an overweight man wearing a dark-blue tracksuit, smelling vaguely of urine. Charles assumed he'd been made to attend the interview by the jobcentre and was full of resentment that someone would make such little effort when it came to their monarchy. If this was the competition, he had nailed it already, he thought.

Ten minutes later, Charles was in the room. 'Charles Paisley?' asked a large overweight man with short red hair that had been clearly disappearing for a while.

'Yes. Nice to meet you' replied Charles in the Queen's English, minimising his Thames Estuary twang. He reached out and shook hands with the man, ensuring the grip was tight and confident.

'Pleased to meet you, Charles. Please have a seat.'

He sat and smiled at the man, noticing a second man with suspicious eyes and a menacing demeanour, sat beside him. 'The man you see next to me is from the security services. As is customary, the vetting process for potential employees requires that a representative of the security services joins the interview. Is this okay?'

'Of course.'

‘Good. As you may have expected, we have already conducted background checks in relation to health, crime, education, work history, and the like.’ Charles smiled and nodded. ‘Okay. Good! Right, well then, why don’t you start by telling us a bit about yourself, Charles?’

Charles had no trouble here, starting out by explaining that he was named after the Prince of Wales. He described his family’s generational admiration of the monarchy, his collection of royal memorabilia, and his own childhood dream to meet the Queen.

‘That is fantastic, Charles. I shouldn’t say this, but you are the most enthusiastic candidate we’ve seen today.’

‘Thank you, I am honoured.’

‘On to business. Do you have any experience in cleaning?’

Charles felt slight surprise at the question, although, admittedly, he had no real idea of what the job would entail. ‘Is it a cleaning job?’ he asked.

‘In a way,’ replied the interviewer, studying a document before him. 'You would be Executive in Charge of Hygiene at the Palace.’

‘Well, I mostly have experience in bar and restaurant work—and of course the importance of personal hygiene is paramount when dealing with food and drink.’

The interviewer slowly looked up from the document with an almost sinister grin. ‘Very good!’ he said.

Charles smiled. ‘Anyway, I’m adaptable to different working environments ...'

The interviewer cut in. 'Charles, I can pretty safely say that you have the job. Full training will be provided and I'm sure that a man with your experience and enthusiasm will have no trouble picking things up in no time.'

Charles could not believe his luck. After asking a few questions about the job, they exchanged formal pleasantries and Charles left with a spring in his step. He floated down the street with glee, went into a phone box, snorted a line of ketamine and wrote 'Rule Britannia' on his forearm with a biro, before entering a pub and losing his mind for the night with Philip.

Charles woke up on his floor, still wearing his tailored suit, with the worst hangover he'd ever had. Philip was there, looking wired and going through Charles' royal collectables. 'How much are these worth?' Philip asked.

As soon as the question registered in his mind, Charles had to run to the toilet. Alcohol and ketamine had induced diarrhoea. It was excruciating. 'You okay in there?' asked Philip. 'That doesn't sound too healthy!'

He couldn't muster the strength to answer and, when the whole ordeal was nearly over, he needed a moment to rest and catch up with his breathing. From his bedroom, he could hear his phone ringing. 'Philip, can you answer that?'

There were footsteps, mumbling, and then a knock on the toilet door. 'Charles, it was the Palace. They asked when you can start so I told them ASAP. You have training tomorrow.'

Charles, full of joy, let out what remained from the badly digested kebab, and the drug and alcohol cocktail. He sorted himself out and left the bathroom. His physical condition wasn't great, but there was no doubt about his euphoria.

Philip was standing with a manic grin on his face whilst fidgeting with a Diamond Jubilee teacup.

Put that down! That's very rare!' Charles snapped. Philip placed the cup carefully back onto the shelf.

'Time to celebrate!' Philip said persuasively, heading for a bottle of brandy on the counter and pouring two glasses of E&Js.

'Cheers,' said Charles, clutching his glass with shaky hands.

'To the Queen,' said Philip, sarcastically. They clinked glasses and Charles took the brandy in one go whilst Philip sipped his. Philip racked up two fairly large-sized lines of coke, rolled up a £20 note and offered it to Charles. 'You first, you've earned it!'

The brandy worked a little, but the shakes still had a hold of him, so he snorted the line in one go and hoped it would improve his condition. He felt that initial rush of energy and confidence, but a few seconds later his stomach dropped again. He ran back to the toilet.

'They cut it with baby laxatives,' Philip called out from the kitchen, laughing. After a good five minutes in the bathroom, Charles went back to join Philip who was snorting his second line. He felt a lot better now and the coke broke through the weary hangover, taking him back to that wonderful realisation: he would be employed at Her Majesty's Service.

'Charles,' said Philip, offering him a line, 'I bet that you could find all sorts of things at the Palace that would make a killing on eBay.' Charles snorted his line.

'I'm not going to steal from the Palace, you twat,' he snapped.

'No but, I mean, take for example, if the Queen left a used tissue in the bathroom bin or something. Could you grab it and let me have it?'

'That's not going to happen!'

'It really is a fantastic business opportunity, Charles! People pay serious money for things like that.'

Charles ignored him and the pair sat around for a while, drinking brandy, snorting coke, and talking shit before they decided to hit the town. Before leaving, Charles made sure to set his alarm for his training day and then he called his mother to tell her the news.

'Our boy! I'm so proud, so very, very proud!' she cried.

The big day arrived. Before leaving, Charles took some anti-diarrhoea tablets and ginger-extract to try and keep in shape throughout the day. This time, he was instructed to arrive at the Palace itself. As the tour guide showed him and two other new employees around the building, he was in awe. He had dreamt of being here and had seen pictures, but they did nothing for its wonders. At the end of the tour, he and his companions were split up and he was taken to a door with the title 'Personal Hygiene Unit' engraved into it. Inside, the room was white, clinical, and surgically clean.

'You will be in charge of Her Majesty's personal hygiene,' said a man in a white tuxedo. 'I am Gideon Butler-Massey, your supervisor.'

'Nice to meet you,' said Charles.

As Charles went to shake his hand, his supervisor turned away and instead reached for some latex gloves and handed them to Charles. 'You will be needing these. I started out in your position and, if you do well, you could perhaps become a supervisor too.'

As Charles went to shake his supervisor's hand, he turned away and instead reached for some latex gloves and handed them to Charles. 'You will be needing these. I started out in your position and, if you do well, you could perhaps become a supervisor too.

Charles listened carefully and was completely focused, his hangover masked by his enthusiasm. 'You will need a white tuxedo, like mine. You may wear it only at work, however, as it is the property of the Palace. Please excuse me for a moment.'

The supervisor left the room and Charles studied it. There was a basin for hand washing, some antibacterial handwash, and lots of toilet paper. He could feel his stomach starting to turn again and quickly popped another anti-diarrhoea tablet before the supervisor re-entered.

'Do you have a strong stomach?' he asked, whilst putting on his gloves.

'Yes, I believe I do.'

'Okay with gore? Bodily fluids? Unpleasant odours?'

Charles hesitated as he had never pondered this. He attempted a joke. 'I live in East London—one cannot survive there without a strong stomach.'

The supervisor smiled with pitying humour. 'Good. Here, this may be useful.' He passed Charles a surgical face mask and continued, 'It should help with the smell.'

Charles wondered what it was he'd actually be doing. 'Mr. Butler-Massey, what exactly will I be doing?'

There was a brief pause, as Mr. Butler-Massey put his hands on the counter and sighed. 'This is never easy to explain, but you'll be taking care of certain aspects of Her Majesty's personal hygiene.'

'As in?'

'As in, you will be ensuring that Her Majesty is clean once she has finished in the toilet.'

Charles felt the nausea creep up in him again, causing him to sweat and shake. He had to fight not to heave, but he swallowed his pride and remembered where he was and who he was working for. Someone had to do it, he thought. After some deep breaths, he felt better.

'Any other questions?' asked Mr. Butler-Massey.

'No. Thank you.'

'Right, now is the time for your training in etiquette.'

They spent a number of hours on the protocol and proper conduct of Her Majesty's Executive in Charge of Personal Hygiene. Which toilet paper to use, how to dispose of waste, how to address Her Majesty, and the rota, which was scheduled according to Her Highness' regular movements. Three shifts a day, generally, but hygiene operatives had to be on call at the Palace in case of emergencies. There were night shifts too, but those were reserved for more experienced workers.

'Emergencies?' Charles asked.

'Food poisoning, stomach bugs—that kind of thing.'

It was time for a lunch break. Charles wasn't hungry, so he went to throw up in the staff toilets, followed by consuming more anti-diarrhoea tablets and ginger extract.

Charles was then placed on call and, whilst in Her Majesty's bathroom, spent some time admiring his appearance in his new white tuxedo. He had never had a job in which he could dress so well. He was not allowed to use the toilets and merely hung around in a fashion similar to those men who try to sell aftershave in nightclub rest-rooms. Upon flicking through some of the books in the bathroom bookshelf, he was surprised to find *The 120 Days*

of Sodom by Marquis de Sade and *The Book of the Law* by Aleister Crowley, amongst other titles with depraved connotations. As he was flicking through *The 120 Days of Sodom*, impressed by the amount of hand-written notes in the text, Her Majesty entered and glared at him.

'You shouldn't be looking at those, you know,' she said, dismissively, as she walked over to the toilet and sat upon it.

'I apologise, Your Majesty,' he said, feeling terribly embarrassed.

He immediately got to his station—a small box-area beside the toilet, on which he had to kneel with toilet paper at his disposal. The Queen began to groan and there was a large splatter. As soon as the smell became apparent, Charles began to feel his body cringe, and his stomach heave. The more the sounds came—the grunts and the splatters and the terrible stench—the more Charles had to struggle to keep it all in. He tried so hard, thinking FOR QUEEN AND COUNTRY! He tensed his body and squeezed his stomach until his eyes watered. YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU, he thought.

His eyes bled as his body screamed in agony, but he mustered up his strength and forced his heart and mind to retain his patriotism—his duty. Another splatter, worse than the last. The stench was like nothing Charles had ever known. It was indescribable. He chanted to himself:

RULE BRITANNIA
BRITANNIA RULES THE WAVES
BRITONS NEVER, NEVER, NEVER SHALL BE SLAVES!

As the Queen's business came to an end, the worst was yet to come. His duty was to wipe until the coast was clear, so to speak. Teary-eyed and shaking through a cold sweat, Charles had difficulty composing himself. When it was all done, Her Majesty got up.

'Thank you, Your Majesty,' said Charles, as was customary.

She washed her hands, picked up the copy of *The 120 Days of Sodom* and then left. Charles collapsed, flustered, and tried to catch his breath. After a minute or two, he felt better, and even proud of his first shift.

His supervisor called him into the hygiene office and gave him a verbal warning for looking at the Queen's book collection. Other than that, he was told he'd done a great job and would get used to the nausea in no time. They dealt with bank details, rotas, and formalities like holidays and sick pay. Despite the low wage, Charles was still ecstatic to be working for the royals, albeit shocked about what the job entailed.

He called his mother to explain his first day. At first, she was silent and seemingly shocked. 'We're so proud ... Our boy, the Palace ... ' she said, quivering and uncertain, after a significant delay. Her tone was less enthusiastic than it had been previously but, as Charles reminded her, it needed to be done.

Things got easier over the next two weeks, as the retching and heaving became more manageable. The rent was now all paid up. Charles had seen Philip two nights a week, but never at his flat. 'Why can't we jam at yours? Pubs are too expensive!' Philip would ask. Charles gave him a phoney excuse about the place being refurbished, but Philip was suspicious.

On the way to work that morning, two weeks into his service, Charles had to collect something from the pet store. A realisation while performing his duties as Executive in Charge of Personal Hygiene had led him to start buying doggy bags. Not the doggy bags you get at parties for leftovers, but the other kind—the kind that dog owners use to collect the waste of their pets when out in public. He bought two boxes of *Poochie Poos*, a good quality, highly

recommended, dog-waste bag, according to Internet reviews. Charles only wanted the finest materials for serving the Crown.

It could be quite difficult getting the desired substance into the bags, and out of the Palace, but so far, Charles had managed it. His supervisor was happy with his performance and said that the Queen herself was very impressed with his services. Pleasing the Queen meant more to Charles than anything else.

Once at his workstation, Charles waited patiently as always, admiring the regal decor that surrounded him. He knew the Queen had suffered stomach trouble over the last few days, and so he had to be careful when holding the bag to receive her excrement. With minor overspill, he managed to contain the waste, tie the bag and put it into his pocket.

'Thank you, Your Majesty,' he said, as was customary.

This time—the first time since he'd started working at the Palace—the Queen smiled at him. He felt a warmth he had never felt before and smiled back tearfully, still with the bag in the pocket of his white tuxedo jacket. During the next and final shift of the day, the Queen's stool was more easily manageable and could be bagged without difficulty. He was sure to keep the bags in different pockets. Finished for the day, he headed back to the flat as there was important work to be done.

In his bedroom, the royal memorabilia had been moved to a bookcase near the door. The shelves bookending the Union Jack now housed thirty-two jars, each one containing a genuine sample of the Queen's stool. His original collection of memorabilia still pleased him, but this new collection was far more intimate and, in his opinion, beautiful. Each jar was dated, timed, and the stool was graded. He kept a dossier of information regarding the Queen's eating habits, her bowel movements, and the quality of

her excrement. This was why he didn't want Philip to come to the flat. It was Charles' private collection and it was no one's business (although technically, it was the Queen's 'business').

Despite seeing Philip a few times a week for drinks, Charles had become withdrawn. Philip was concerned for his well-being. As Charles added information on the Queen's latest bowel movements in the logbook, there was a knock at the door. He ignored it, but the knocking persisted and, whilst still looking at his logbook, he started to panic slightly.

'Open up, Charles,' came Philip's muffled voice.

Charles set the logbook down and briefly looked at the shelf. Noticing that one of the jars was in the wrong place, he fixed it and went to the door. He opened it with the chain on. 'Hi Philip,' he said solemnly.

'What's going on? Where you been?'

'Just busy.'

'Busy doing what?'

'Work stuff.'

'Right. Work stuff. Can I at least come in?'

'Now's not a good time.'

'Please Charles, I'm worried about you.'

Reluctantly, Charles let Philip come in. 'What on earth is that smell?' Philip gasped, holding his nose.

'I don't know.' Charles was still thinking about his logbook and the new entry he needed to make. He was forgetting a vital piece of information. What was it she had for breakfast? He got it. 'French toast!' he gleefully exclaimed.

Philip looked at him as if he was mad and, perhaps he was right. He started to study the strange collection of jars while Charles went back to his logbook. 'What the fuck are these, Charles? Jars of shit?' Philip asked, flabbergasted.

'It's the Queen's waste. Have some respect!'

'Why on earth have you been collecting the Queen's "waste"? I'm getting out of here, dude. This is too crazy. You need help!' Philip left in haste, without Charles noticing. He finished his log and went to bed.

The gloomy morning Whitechapel sky faced Charles as he woke up from the most peaceful sleep he had ever had. He had a new-found purpose in life and despite the bleak sky, he was excited to get back to cataloguing. He opened his laptop to check his emails and the news. There on *The Guardian* site, the top headline read 'Security breach as sensitive information belonging to the royal family appears for sale on eBay.'

Charles was hit by a wave of dread. Is the Queen okay? Reading through the article, he was frustrated that the 'sensitive information' hadn't been named. He turned on Radio 4 and paced around his room frantically.

'It is believed that the stolen item—which has been removed from eBay and cannot be named for legal reasons—is concerned with the Queen's personal health,' said the radio announcer.

Charles couldn't think straight. Looking up to his shelf and the

collection, he noticed that a jar was missing, and remembered Philip's get-rich-quick scheme. Philip must have taken one of the jars during his visit.

'My collection! Ruined!' cried Charles.

Charles was devastated and went straight to the drink cabinet, downing the last third of a bottle of scotch. The radio announcer explained that a nationwide manhunt was being launched to find the perpetrator, although this didn't register with Charles. His devastation had turned to anger, and he left the flat and headed toward Philip's. Fuming, he stopped to buy a bottle of whisky, which he gulped furiously.

Yards ahead, he noticed two police cars heading towards him, with sirens. Looking back, he could see another one. The cars stopped and the police apprehended Charles, now drunk and disorientated. As they put him into a police car, he screamed continuously. 'My collection! My beautiful collection!'

Charles fainted.

'We're ready to interview you now,' said an officer. Charles was groggy and disoriented and followed the officer robotically to the interview room. He had no recollection of being arrested, charged or put into a cell, but noticed marks on his wrist from handcuffs. 'Right Charles, you said you didn't want a solicitor,' said the officer.

Charles didn't remember even being asked but he wasn't fussed either way. 'That's fine. I just want this over and done with.'

The interview didn't last long. Charles explained his unconditional love of the monarchy and that his intentions had been noble all along. He was informed that Philip had been apprehended for trying to sell the stool sample on eBay. 'He's a treacherous cunt!'

Once the interview was over, Charles was placed back in a cell. Later he was charged with theft and treason, then sentenced to three years in prison. The whole case was D-noticed, the public receiving no information since the media was gagged. When Charles got to Belmarsh, he smiled when he read the words 'Her Majesty's Prison Service' as he knew, in his heart, that he was still serving his Queen.

RULE BRITANNIA, he thought. FOR QUEEN AND COUNTRY!

He hoped that Her Majesty's next worker cared as much as he did. He pictured the Union Jack in his mind and cried tears of joy and pride.

RULE BRITANNIA

Dennis

A. Taylor

‘Dennis! Dennis!’ A tall man standing in a shabby rowing boat navigated murky, shallow waters on the overflow of the canal. His voice bled fear as he shouted again and again, ‘Dennis! Dennis!’

His face was anguished and ghostly in the winter evening.

Emerging from a warm, shabby narrowboat, a daughter and father stepped onto the towpath. Nattering and unaware of the pleas coming from the water, they walked towards the sound. The man in the row boat became more desperate as he saw them approach and screamed, ‘Help! Help!’ The father and daughter stopped, before the man recognised the woman, ‘Hester, phone 999. Dennis has fallen in.’ Despite the urgency in the man’s voice Hester hesitated. ‘What do you mean? Are you sure?’

‘He was on the raft! … and I heard a splash … and now he isn’t there.’ The man's tone was sure but manic. Hester glanced at the raft rocking against Ed's man-made waves. Sat upon it was a precariously placed tent: a design akin to what a child might put together in a bathtub, like a ship on top of a yellow duck. For the past two nights Dennis had been sleeping in that tent. The raft sat in between a sunken narrowboat and a worn-out, long narrowboat and a small cruise boat with a broken window. Aside from the sunken boat, all were inhabited. The sunken boat had belonged to Ed, who now lived in a makeshift boat made of decking tied

together with rope. In daylight it glistened from the stainless steel pans that hung outside, attached to the large stretch of canvas that sought to provide shelter from the wind, rain and sharp winter. There were stained-glass windows and a fire, which released smoke from an ill-fitted chimney.

'Just a splash, Ed? Are you sure that was Dennis?' Hester asked. Unsure amongst the panic, Hester delayed reaching for her phone. Ed continued to pull the boat across the water screaming, 'Dennis! Dennis! Where are you?' Suddenly three dogs jumped from the small cruise boat onto the towpath along with a head with thick stubble. With coherent, but slurred, words the man asked what was happening.

'Dennis fell in! We need the police. Someone call the police!' Ed shouted, his voice becoming increasingly defeated, but without anger at the lack of action.

'Oh, right,' said the man. 'Oh, the man from the other day? Oh yea, I heard a splash.' From this another head appeared, and a woman with a croaky voice echoed what the man had said, 'Oh yes, there was definitely a splash.' She then whistled 'Buster, Shaun, Pedro, come on in!'

Ten minutes had passed before Hester pulled her phone from her pocket and dialled 999. Her father remained silent, rocking from heel to toe to keep warm and sooth his impatience: he wanted to continue his birthday evening with a drink.

'Hi, yes. Someone has fallen into the canal. Yes, right by Wellington Place, just under the bridge … I don't know his age. His name is Dennis. Yes, my name is Hester Carter.' Hester assured Ed that a fire engine and the police were on their way. At which point the man and woman disappeared into their boat followed by the three dogs. It was unbeknownst to those outside the boat how all five

beings could be positioned inside comfortably. Ed continued to pull his rowboat across the water, back and forth; it looked like an anxious dog unable to settle. Hester and her father looked up at the bridge and back at Ed. 'They said we need to wait for the fire brigade to get here,' she said to her dad. There was distress in her voice, but the distress was uncertain—she did not know whether to commit to the chaos.

Swiftly after Hester put the phone down, fire engine sirens could be heard from behind the houses lining the canal bank. The blue lights lit the street as half a dozen kitted firefighters emptied the truck and jogged through the alley and over the bridge. Right behind them came two uniformed police officers, their pace slower.

'Hi. Are you Hester?' one firefighter asked, while approaching Hester and her dad.

'Yes. A man has fallen into the canal just there,' Hester confirmed.

'You need to start looking in the water,' Ed shouted at the firefighters.

A firefighter turned to Ed and asked, 'Did you see the man fall in? Do you know how long he has been in the water?'

'I heard a splash,' Ed asserted, 'bout twenty minutes ago.'

'A splash?' the firefighter questioned. He stared the man standing in the rowboat up and down; he shivered in judging sympathy at the thought of wearing a t-shirt. He turned back to Hester, a tall woman wearing a long wool trench coach, her hair tidily clipped back, with, next to her, a tall gentleman in a rain jacket, loafers, and a trimmed beard. 'Did either of you see what happened?' the firefighter asked.

There was distress in her voice, but the distress was uncertain—she did not know whether to commit to the chaos.

As Hester's father began to reply, one of the police officers approached the three of them. 'They are preparing to enter the water now. Are we sure someone fell in? Did anyone see what happened?'

'Hmmm, no …' replied Hester's father. 'We were in the boat just there and came out and Ed was saying a man had fallen in. At which point my daughter called 999.'

'The man could have just gone back to get some tinnies from town without his friend knowing,' the officer suggested.

'Two other people said they heard the splash, not just Ed,' Hester repeated. She could see the firefighters in the background preparing to enter the water.

'And which two people heard this splash?' the officer probed.

'Lenny and Carole. They live on that boat just there.' Hester pointed to the cruise boat barely visible in the dark. The officer glanced at the boat and shone her flashlight towards it revealing the ripped tarpaulin and broken side-window. Without a reaction she turned back to Hester and then back to her pad.

'Right,' said the officer, 'and do you know the man who fell in?'

'I … err … I just know he arrived a few days ago and was sleeping in that tent,' explained Hester. Again the officer glanced briefly and continued noting down Hester's information.

'Do you know why he was sleeping in that tent?' asked the officer.

'I don't know. He was a friend of Ed's.' Hester looked up again and could see one firefighter, attached to a rope, walk into the water with a torch.

'OK, thanks Hester. Will we be able to find you at …' the officer turned back the pages on her notepad, 'nine Wellington Street?' she asked.

At this point Hester looked up at her dad who with a straight face said, 'We will be at The Plough for now, but yes, she will be there.' Hester confirmed with muted agreement, her feet bouncing as her dad's had been. Both wanted to leave the cold. Both wanted to leave the scene.

Over the bridge there was a small group of people who had gathered to glimpse at what had happened. While some residents had come out of their homes, others had drawn their curtains to block the continuous flashing blue light, some turning up their TVs, while others turned them off. Hester and her dad ducked under the tape and passed the group of people and stepped straight into The Plough.

Hester's dad's glasses steamed when they entered. The chatter consumed the room as everyone sought to be heard. Hester turned to her dad and straining her voice to be heard said, 'You find a seat and I'll get a couple of drinks in. What do you want?'

'A cider and some crisps. Thatchers if they have it.' They parted and Hester approached the bar and ordered.

Hester's dad sipped at his cider, while Hester slurped her gin and tonic through a straw. Her dad broke the silence. 'There is nothing you could have done, love.'

'I know,' she said, defeated.

'You phoned the police and no one knows what happened.'

'Can I stay at the house tonight?' she asked.

'Of course,' he said.

When Hester looked up she saw a small man standing silently in front of their table. She recognised him immediately as John. He lived in the long, shabby boat next to the sunken boat. John's slouching posture made him look slightly smaller than he was. He had a white balding head and strong beard. His clothes were once hardy, but now were worn from decades of use and his hands were jagged from digging, pulling rope and the accumulation of scarring from working with his hands. Hester didn't know much about John, just that he had lived in his boat for over a decade. He seemed known within the community, but somehow kept himself to himself.

'Can I sit?' John asked. Hester smiled and willed him to take a seat. 'They won't let me through. They said there has been an accident.'

'Dennis fell in the canal and never came back up,' she said.

'Oh right,' John said before sipping his cider. The three of them sat in silence. Hester could hear the speculation fill the room.

One local could be heard asking, 'Did you see the fire engines outside?'

'Oh yes, I saw that, blocking the road and there is no access to the canal path. Something about someone falling in,' replied another local.

'Yes, apparently someone who lives on one of those worn-out boats.'

'Where the addicts live?'

'Probably out of it when they fell in. Such a shame.'

Hester sat in partial shock not knowing what to say to John. His

face seemed neutral, almost defeated. Her dad looked similar, his face just less worn and his beard freshly groomed from his birthday treat to himself. She clutched at her jumper, poking her thumbs through a hole with one hand while reaching for her straw and stirring the ice in her finished gin and tonic with the other. 'How have you been, John?' she asked, trying to break the silence.

'Yeah, alright. You know. Not too bad,' he replied. Hester went in with a follow-up question, but curled her body lowered in defeat.

The door opened and the police officer from earlier entered and shouted.

'Is there a Hester Carter here?' The chattering slightly subsided with a few heads staring at the officer and then around the pub again. Hester looked up. The officer, receiving no response, shouted again, 'I am looking for a Hester Carter.' This calmed the rest of the chatter at which point Hester hesitantly raised her hand as she rose shyly, slouching as she did so.

'Hi … Hi, yes I am just here.' Either out of politeness or a lack of interest at this point the rest of the pub carried on with their evening small-talk; although Hester felt a strong social burn from the remaining few glares from punters curious about the incident on the canal.

Hester approached the officer and they greeted each other with awkward familiarity.

'Aw, great, Hester. I had to check other pubs. I am glad I found you here. Did you make the original 999 call earlier?' asked the officer.

'Yes, that's right,' confirmed Hester.

'I just need to take a statement from you about the incident. Do

you mind if we go somewhere a little quieter?'

'Hmmm.' Hester glanced nervously at her dad who was watching cautiously. 'Hmmm, yes of course. I have just had a drink though. Is that OK?'

'Yes, you seem fine. We can go to my car and take the statement there, if that is OK?'

'Yes sure, yes OK. Do you know how long it will take?' Hester asked, glancing between the officer and her dad.

The officer followed Hester's eyes as she glanced between her father and the police officer. 'Best to tell your dad you'll meet him at home,' she said.

'OK, right,' Hester walked towards her dad and picked up her coat and explained what the officer had said. He muttered a few words and went to finish his pint. Hester smiled at John and said farewell before going back to the officer who was holding the pub door open, waiting for her. They both walked out of the warm pub into the chill of the winter's night. The floor now sparkled from the street lights and frost. The crowd had dissipated but the fire engines, police car and now ambulance remained, as did the police tape and the officers on guard. The officer took Hester to her police car opposite the entrance to the bridge with full sight of the steps. In the light you would be able to see the remaining firefighters in the water still searching for Dennis. Forty-five minutes had passed since Hester had called 999.

'Thanks for coming, Hester. I know I am interrupting your evening,' the officer said while filling in boxes with numbers and names. 'I just need a statement from you about this evening,' she continued.

‘Have you found Dennis yet?’ Hester asserted ‘Is he OK?

‘Unfortunately we haven’t found Dennis yet.’ The officer continued to fill in the forms before looking up at Hester with a sympathetic face. ‘Shall we start from the beginning and you can tell us what you saw?’

Hester proceeded to outline the events of the evening: how she and her dad came from the boat hearing shouts for help; the calling of the police; who Dennis was and what little she knew about him. ‘Will you get statements from Ed and the others? They heard more than me and Ed knows more than me.’

‘You made the call, so we can use yours for now. Also Ed seemed intoxicated at the scene.’

‘Right, well, I just know Dennis appeared a few days earlier and was staying with Ed.’

‘On the raft?’ the officer enquired.

‘Yes, I think so. I am not sure,’ replied Hester.

Before Hester could continue a group of firefighters came jogging down the steps of the bridge carrying a stretcher. Hester let go of a yelp. ‘Is that Dennis?’ she asked.

The officer looked up. ‘Oh, it looks like they found a body,’ she replied,looking at Hester whose hand now covered her face and whose body had begun to shake. The officer’s radio sounded, ‘They have found a body. Male. They are taking him to be resuscitated now.’ The officer in the car turned to Hester and said, ‘You might want to look away, it might be too distressing for you,’ before replying into her radio, ‘Copy’.

Both women continued with the statement. The fan pumping out hot air had steamed all the windows, cocooning Hester from the outside cold air and the vision of paramedics huddled in the ambulance into which they had lifted the stretcher with the man on. Hester's face developed a warm red glow from the heat as she shifted with discomfort in her seat. She continued to answer all the questions in monotone. The police officer finally passed her the pen to sign and initial all the pages of her statement. On the final page Hester let out a sigh, prompting the officer to perk up and respond.

'Yes it's been quite a night. Hopefully you can go home and get some—'

The officer was interrupted with confirmation that despite their best efforts paramedics had failed to revive the body. It was estimated the male had been underwater for over an hour, entangled in the weeds.

'Unfortunately he didn't make it,' the police officer announced. Hester said nothing, opened the car door and slid out. She let the cold air awaken her senses and alert her mind as she made a detour back to her parents' house. Her own boat continued burning the coal she had left on earlier to ensure it was warm for her return. It wouldn't be.

When she arrived home her dad greeted her with a pat on the shoulder.

'I phoned your mum,' he said. 'She said she'll ring you in the morning. I turned the heating on in your room, but we keep the top floor off so it will take a while to warm up I am afraid.'

'Thanks Dad.' Hester took off her coat and scarf, hanging them up in the lobby. 'I think I'll just go to bed. I am a bit tired from tonight. Sorry about your birthday.'

'Aw love, I hope you get some sleep. There was nothing else you could have done. Such a shame.'

Hester climbed the two flights of stairs using the railing to pull her up each step, her body heavy and laboured from the evening. The cold air on the top floor saddened her more. She brushed her teeth and found nightwear. Her dad had made up the bed but it was cold and sharp when she got in. After she turned off the light, Hester wept.

Next morning Hester phoned her boss.

'I am sorry, Amy. I think I need the morning off. A man drowned next to my boat last night and I haven't had much sleep and needed to give a statement.'

'How did he fall in? Was it an accident? Did you know him? Hmmm, do you think you'll be in this afternoon? Or maybe you could come in at lunch?' Amy enquired.

'I didn't know the man,' Hester confirmed. 'He just fell in, and once the fire brigade had retrieved him he was dead. I can come in later, I just need some time.'

'Hmmm, yes. OK. Well, I hope you rest up and I will see you later today.'

'Thanks,' said Hester and she put the phone down.

Hester still felt heavy and groggy from the cold last night. Her warm shower heated her muscles and her body responded with relief. Her dad had already started working by the time she went downstairs and so she ate her toast and tea alone. She then decided to head back to the boat.

On the way Hester picked up a bouquet of flowers from the corner shop to lay on the grass next to the raft. The scene looked casual. John was sawing some wood and looked up and nodded to Hester. He said nothing more. Neither did Hester. Instead she laid the flowers down just as Carole came out from her boat, followed by the bouncing dogs, who scattered across the towpath.

'Such a shame. But there was nothing I could do,' Carole said.

'No,' replied Hester.

'He seemed like a nice bloke. Kept himself to himself,' continued Carole.

'Do you know where Ed is?' asked Hester.

'Oh, out and about. I saw him early this morning. He is very sad. I think they were friends,' replied Carole. 'Well, I am off to town. See you later.'

Hester waved to Carole and went to her boat to get a few more things for later. She decided to stay at her parents' for another night.

A week later Hester read in the paper that an autopsy had confirmed the drowned man in the river as Dennis Campell, fifty-six. Despite the best efforts of emergency services called to the scene, Dennis was pronounced dead after a valiant attempt to revive him failed. He was the second person to have drowned in the canal near Williams Way that year. The area was known to the council who were looking into removing the boats moored there; however, there remained a legal dispute over the land making that process difficult. Dennis was said to be new to the area and his relatives remained unknown.

He seemed like a nice bloke. Kept himself to himself.

***

Ali Taylor (they/them) lives in Leeds trying to spend more time on walks across the Moors. Ali is queer, grew up in poverty, is a care leaver, and has a love-hate relationship with academia. Their writing interests include social and economic inequalities, capturing relational dynamics, and the everyday. Ali is keen to collaborate with others, share writing, and encourage other writers to write more. ali.v.taylor.90@gmail.com.

The Christmas Grab Bag

Jim Donnelly

Queens, New York City, in the early 1970s

'I don't have this money!'

Her voice was something between a shriek and a lamentation. She was sitting at the bedroom window, backlit by a street lamp, the avenue three floors below. A menthol cigarette rested on the sill in a tin ashtray. I was asking for money for the Christmas 'grab bag'.

'Just tell them I'm on welfare. I don't have money for prizes—for grab bags.'

I was always to say that only she was on welfare, a way to spare myself shame I suppose, but not terribly thought-out. We were both of us on welfare, as the neighbourhood bullies never failed to remind us. They were out there now, mimicking kung fu films. I argued my case in the bedroom half-light, she at her evening station: a dilapidated chair from the chrome dinette. Occasionally a loud profanity would issue from the street. I recognised the voices of kids I knew, who chose their times for knowing me.

'All the kids are putting something in, Ma. It'll be embarrassing to be left out.'

'Alright. Go across to Doc's before he closes, and get a toy off the swivel rack. Here's a dollar.'

I looked forlornly at the dollar in my hand, thinking of the children at school. They seemed absurdly wealthy to me: their faces, healthy and scrubbed, their perfect

clothes, even their Crayola crayons. Many had the deluxe sixty-four edition, with colours I'd never heard of, colours I'd later encounter in snooty mail-order catalogues. I had the bargain basic eight-pack: black, brown, green, blue, etc.

It was an ordinary city-school, but the neighbourhood was posh, and that made all the difference. I had cousins in the school, and by mistake or an act of grace, an anonymous staffer had pencilled me in. Because I lived just a block beyond the district line, no one made an issue of it. Everyone said I was lucky. But 'lucky' really applied to my classmates, in this random lottery of birth. It seemed like anything was theirs for the asking.

'Can I have a little more money, Ma?'

She made a sound of resignation and scraped up the change on her night stand. I was hoping for bills, but decided against pressing my luck.

I still remember the pathetic toy I purchased at Doc's pharmacy, a transparent blue gun that discharged rubber pellets, destined to break on its maiden voyage. Even the packaging wouldn't hold together. On top of that, gift wrapping was beyond my mother's tranquillised hands, so it wound up an awkward, misshapen blob sheathed in little Christmas trees.

***

'Are you ready for the grab bag?'

It was recess, in the school-yard, cold and bracing, snow flurries riding the air with your breath. It was Vinny that spoke, a handsome Italian kid forever throwing a forelock back from his face.

'I guess so,' I said, in a garbled sixth-grade undertone, wishing the grab bag folly was over with.

'Well I bought somethin boss with my allowance,' he said, gesturing to the word 'boss', a forearm and fist motion in a straight line from the waist. Here was a quirk I hadn't considered, fellow classmates *investing* in the bag, spending money earmarked for other things.

'You mean you didn't have to ask for the money?'

'Nah,' Vinny said, 'I had it from doing odd jobs for my dad.'

Vinny's dad picked him up from school in a Cadillac. Show up in a fancy car in my neighbourhood, I thought, and people became suspicious.

And odd jobs weren't the world of my mother and I; in fact there was never a job of any kind that I remember. Asleep when I left for school in the morning, she was in a medicated haze when I came home, propped in a threadbare recliner, the TV static and snow. I would often wave my hand in her face to revive her.

'Wow,' I said, 'maybe you shoulda saved your bread, man, and got your folks to pay for it cause it's a school thing.' I was probing, trying to understand the phenomenon, but I didn't have the keys to the country club.

'Naw,' he said, 'they wouldn'ta done it. Besides, there's gonna be some boss gifts and I want in. Monica, man? Her parents are all kindsa rich. Think of that present alone.'

'It's a grab bag,' I said. 'You could come away with anything.' With that came the fear and loathing around my crummy contribution.

'Why? What did you buy?' Vinny asked scornfully, as if he'd read my thought balloon. 'Used underwear? Feminine napkins?!'

I would often wave my hand in her face to revive her.

In those days every boy went gaga for that term. They heard it on TV, saw it in magazine ads. He romped off across the school-yard, adrenalised with wit. Monica, whom he'd mentioned, was standing with a group of girls by the chain-link fence. Both beautiful and rich, she was centripetal. She glanced in my direction, no more than a speck on her scanner. The cliché would be to say I felt naked, but really I felt quite loaded down, a walking armoire, full of shabby, second-hand clothes.

Christmas was approaching, and after a day of tedious jollity, the time for the grab bag had arrived.

We were told to come up front with our presents to an oversized

shopping bag next to Mrs. Thielman's desk. Fortunately for me there was a clamour, and a cluster of sixth-grade bodies eager to drop their treasures inside. In a furtive but futile way I brought my arm from behind my back and eased it in. Futile because being seen didn't matter, my package was about as subtle as Nagasaki, and I was the poorest kid in class. The other gifts laid so symmetrically that Mrs. Thielman kept adjusting mine as each successive present piled up. I caught her eye at one point, a look conveying pity and protectiveness, with some curious touch of regret, the nature of which I couldn't discern.

We returned to our seats, awaiting Mrs. Theilman's methodology. Would she call us up alphabetically? Or in linear order, seat by seat? She decided on the random approach, calling out names at her pleasure—her pleasure and my agony. With each successive name I sunk down further in my seat. Eagerly, they all reached in, covering their eyes, studiously avoiding the poorly wrapped misfortune.

Then came a novel idea: *go up and get it yourself.* Have it both ways, I thought. You took part as tradition demanded, bringing a prize for the bag, exchanging it for your due. Conjure your best disdainful middle-class look for the hunk of junk you got stuck with. 'Egads! What clod is responsible for this?! After all the money and effort Mummy went through … ' Or some such turgid crap. But something crept up unawares. Perhaps impersonating the manor-born had put me in touch with that singular air of entitlement. I found myself wanting that prize. I wouldn't be a martyr, sparing a classmate the pain of a pharmacy toy. I'd reach into the bag, feign covering my eyes, and avoid my gift like everyone else. Just like them I wanted something good—I was entitled to it. But it sprang from a different fount. I had taken their condescending, Richie-Rich crap for too long. I wanted redress. I wanted my pound of flesh.

Vinny was called up. Nearly all had gone back to their seats with

their presents, so the pickings were slim. He reached in, pulling out the misshapen blob. I cringed, sinking in my seat watching him. The wrap fell off from fatigue with his touch. The look on his face was vintage Vinny, shuffling his feet, hands in his pockets, something out of Mickey Spillane—a loser at a crap game. Disgusted, he threw it to one side of his desk, like a Christmas card without the requisite cash.

Shortly thereafter I was called. I was the next to last so only two prizes remained. At my desk I unwrapped a large weighty box, an exorbitant paint set. 'Cultivate the young Picasso,' it said, and its graphics, its heft, and the quality of its contents all spoke of money. But I didn't care. I had no interest in it. Painting was something my wealthy classmates did, like going with their parents to Europe. It seemed so feathery, like all their delicate pursuits, excluding a kid like me by design. I'd be lying to say I don't know what happened to that paint set; it wound up in a trash can, after years in a closet, forgotten, a casualty of harried lives. From eviction to eviction, from church charity to welfare line, from school to school and the faces of friends whose names I'll never recall—hardly a way to cultivate the young Picasso. But I never forgot that school, for even today I see everything through its lens. I got my best education there, an all-around education.

***

Jim Donnelly is a former trucker, forklift operator, warehouse worker and union organiser. A writer and musician, his essays, reviews, and prose have appeared in *Anarchy, City of Dis, The Cafe Review* and in a regular column on media for *The Aquarian Weekly.* His two collections of poetry are published by Moon Pie Press (www.moonpiepress.com). He now provides education and entertainment to elder communities.

Looking up at the mottled brown ceiling and the sick-green, peeling wallpaper in the corner of the room, suddenly the boy relates with Abe so deeply that he let out a silent cry. Lips pursed as if sewn shut, eyes bulging up towards the ceiling.

Watershed

Connor Robertson

Another Saturday afternoon at his dad's house by the harbour. Locked again in the bedroom in front of the TV playing the Playstation. Another day playing *Abe's Odyssey*.

After overhearing that he and his people, the Mudokons, were to be slaughtered for processing, the young boy of our story assumes the role of Abe as he attempts the perilous quest to escape—and to liberate as many enslaved Mudokons as he can.

In the gloom of the barely decorated room, as Abe runs in anguish along the pipes and rafters of the meat factory, the desperation of Abe grabs him with a meat hook. Frantically he taps, then pounds the controller in his hands as his hope turns to despair. Abe falls from the rafters, and is caught by the guards of the factory. Game set match. His brother slides the controller from his loose, defeated hands as he falls backwards onto the bed with a thump and a groan. Looking up at the mottled brown ceiling and the sick-green peeling wallpaper in the corner of the room, suddenly the boy relates with Abe so deeply that he lets out a silent cry. Lips pursed as if sewn shut, eyes bulging up towards the ceiling.

He flips his legs up into the air, rolls backwards and lands in a sitting position. Elbows on his knees, chin cupped in his hands, he sighs and blows the long bowl-cut hair from his eyes and fixes a strong gaze between the cracks of the floorboards.

Hearing the howling wind and rain rattle the four-square single-glazed window behind him, he jumps up onto the bed and settles his palms on the window ledge to investigate the scene outside. The window frames the gloomy, exciting scene and his gaze deepens

with every speck of rain that rolls down the window, with every wave that crashes over the harbour wall. He stands entranced by the black, choppy water held within the walls of the harbour, see-sawing up towards him and back across to the other side like a sea ghost.

Following the continual back-and-forth swell, he imagines what it would feel like to be cocooned safely in one of the small yachts, rising and falling with the to and fro of the trapped water, rain pelting the roof: peaceful, exciting. He felt for a moment as if he was actually in it. Until he was brought back to the irritation of the four walls of his reality, by the clasp of chains around Abe's wrists as he was caught by the factory guards.

He watched the swell as it licked up against the far wall and out onto the harbour pier. It was then that his sight was snatched by a group of fishermen traipsing along the cobbled pier in yellow and mud-brown jackets, fishing rods held in one hand and rested upon their shoulders. Buckets swinging freely in their fists. They moved steadily. Slowly. In unison, with purpose.

He wanted to be with them.

'Want tae go fishin?' he chirped, turning his head towards his brother and the glowing television set.

'Have you seen the weather? It's pissin it doon.'

'Ah huv seen the weather. Ahm goin anyway. Gonnae get Da tae take me.'

His brother sniggered in disbelief and continued his odyssey.

Jumping down from the bed excitedly, the boy opened the door and spun round towards his brother, sticking his tongue out in

defiance. 'I'll show you,' he thought to himself as he bound down the bare, dark and dusty, creaking staircase. Four steps from the bottom he took a playful giant leap and landed with exaggerated drama, exploding as if he'd come upon a landmine. Staggering, he fell through the cardboard-thin doorway and into the gloom of the maroon front room where his dad lay slumped.

A thick fog of smoke choked and drifted in the air, whirling itself into a storm around the boy as he entered. The shrivelled and dusty bowl of pot-pourri that sat on the mantelpiece had obviously dried to ash. It provided a faint floral whiff, but amidst the reek of smoke, stale booze and this morning's kippers—the dried flowers: redundant. Serving only to remind anyone entering the room that it stank.

From his corner of the living room, in front of the door, the boy observed the scene before him. In the opposite corner of the room was his dad, who couldn't or wouldn't shift his gaze from the blaring television that was in front of him. To his left, in her own corner, sat the new, fat woman. Who, apart from a quick cursory glance, didn't look up from the incessantly working nail-file in her hand. A fat, young barrel of a woman with a perm in a high ponytail and baggy jumper. The boy was sickened by her looks and resented everything about her. Her make-up was white and red: offensive. Frightening. When she turned to look at you it was as if a Spitfire bomber shark had set you in its sights—its red nose bearing down on you with sharp, serrated teeth jutting out in attack.

Turning his attention once more to his dad, the boy took his first tentative steps through the thick gloom towards the figure in the corner. Hesitating, hands clasped behind his back and twisting side to side, he looked at the floor and then up again at his dad. He went to open his mouth but the man was not listening. Too busy grunting at the television set. This confused the boy. But he soon figured that the grunts must have been some kind of laughter,

when something Dale Winton said made the TV audience howl. The full volume of the TV set bled into distortion.

Anxious, sensing doom, the young boy felt like turning and fleeing the room. Suddenly it shrank to a fraction of its size and he had to fight against the incoming walls, and push the ceiling away. Any space in the room was taken up by his dad, the TV set, and the hulking, cackling witch in the corner. Grunts and cackles and the hum of the TV set swirled intimidation in his mind. He wanted so desperately to be free of the place.

The memory of his desire to go fishing reminded him why he was there enduring the stench and anxiety of that gloomy front room. With a zip and a focus his mind cleared and determined his next steps. Towards his dad.

Putting his little hand on the worn-out waxy exterior of the armchair the boy looked up at his dad with a fixed and pleading gaze.

‘Da,’ he said.

No response.

The flat-topped grey bestubbled scruffy-looking man supped from his can and did not shift his eyes from the buzz of the box. Not once. The blue reflection mirrored in his eyes, cutting and jumping continuously. But he was like a stone.

The boy tried again to gain his attention.

‘Da-a,’ he said with pleading emphasis.

Still no reply. No shift of gaze, not a twitch. He did not notice.

The boy began to get angry now, indignant towards the old man who sat in a daze ignoring him.

'Da!' he shouted, stepping further into the centre of his vision and waving his arms, but unable to quite get there because of the footstool. He arched sideways over it and waved his arms.

With one sweeping gesture his dad brushed him aside with the arm that held his lager.

The boy persisted.

'Dad. I want to go fishing. Dad, can you take me fishing?'

No reply.

He asked again, louder.

'Da, can you take me fishing?!'

No reply. He asked again, even louder still.

'DA! CAN YE TAKE—

Suddenly his dad jerked into life and doubled up in anger as he took his sight off the TV for the first time and set his red angry eyes on the boy.

'TAKE YER FUCKIN SEL FUCKIN FISHIN FIR FUCK'S SAKE!!' the old man cursed, thrusting his neck out towards the boy and showering him in spittle like stale sea spray.

'AM WATCHIN THE FUCKINNTELLY EH. TAKE YERSEL FUCKIN FISHIN. FUCK'S SAKE.'

Closing his eyes and wiping his face with his sleeve, the boy snapped his head back and stepped backwards, looking up at the man who leered at him. Well, there you go. His hopes sank with the ship of his heart like the pretty little yacht outside, going down into the black of the harbour floor, and settling amongst the seaweed and rotten fish.

Hurt, but suddenly defiant, the boy turned on his heels and ran out the living room door towards the fishing gear in the hall cupboard, leaving the old man to sit back in his chair and sup the beer, as the fat slug in the corner looked on with a curled lip and a snigger.

He gathered up the rod and tackle-bucket, put his little trainers on and burst out the front door—jacket flapping open in the howling wind and laces writhing about his feet like little snakes in the rain. The boy trundled down the steps away from the house and lowped the dyke. The Great Harbour opened up in front of him and glistened grey, and the waves smashed over the Great Wall, dancing with gusto in patterns all over the pier.

The blow of rejection had shaken him, but almost immediately the hurt disappeared and excitement took hold. 'It looks dangerous over there,' the boy thought to himself, but already his feet were taking him.

In the blink of a dead fish's eye the boy was at the foot of the Old Harbour Bridge and crossing it. Towards the chaos of the Great Ocean, and connection. He stopped at the lip of the bridge to peer down at the choppy water as the fresh rain spat at him, and caressed his soul. The mighty iron chains lapped up against the steel begirt frame of the wooden deck.

Across the bridge he found himself drawn to the bulk of the ruined Harbour Battery, the North Sea and kittiwakes crying all around it. Tripping up and nearly falling, his attention was brought to a tidy pile of green and orange net cages. They filled his little head with wonder and he concluded that they were a nice harbour decoration.

Reaching the other side of the Harbour and the bottom of the enormous 'back wall', he turned and looked back across the way he had come. He could see, in the distance and through the rain,

the dim light of the recently escaped bedroom. He thought of his brother for a moment, sitting there still trying to escape the meat factory, quite happy, and wished that he had come with him, when the Great Sea threw a bucket load of water over the Great Wall to land at his feet. Giggling, the boy trundled on, around the cobbled pier.

On he went, following the spring tide that breathed in a great swelling and rising up. A slow wave spread through the harbour mouth, lifting all the boats as if they were little rubber dinghies. His excitement crystallized, as the boy walked through the harbour mouth, 'The Cliff' rising fifty feet to his right, seagulls cooing and squawking overhead, swooping all around him, like big white bats, in defence of their young. He noted the thick layer of bird shit at his feet, crunching and stinking like dank fish.

To his left, on the other side of the mouth, stood the Castle, and the Maggie oer yonder: the great fortification that now lay in ruins. Slowly crumbling at the behest of the relentless winds and salty air.

The boy pressed on, and chasing the chaos he came out onto a rocky outcrop, well beyond the harbour wall, with the North Sea now opening up right in front of him in panoramic splendour. White horses galloped all across it, appearing and disappearing like magic beasts.

'Unicorns,' he thought.

Such a large bewildering space. The rock and roll of the ocean challenged his equilibrium. Enjoying the disorientation, the waves crashing all around him, he went on around the bend. Up and down, up and down over jagged lumps of rough volcanic rock. He saw the group of fishermen that he had been traipsing round the pier from his bedroom, and that image flashed in his mind like a beacon. He decided that this was where he should be fishing from. Setting his rod and tackle-bucket down clumsily, the nerves began to build as he tried to figure out what to do.

The group looked at the boy, confused, and one fisherman in particular put his rod down in one of the holes in the rock, and looked at the boy with one rough, chubby hand on his big, fleshy hip, the other hand scratching his big grey beard. Interested, confused, concerned. The man wondered why the boy was down there all alone. Watching him fumble with his rod he took pity on him and went to lend a hand.

Setting the boy's line up, ready to cast, he asked him, 'Have ye any bait, lad?' He realised that he didn't have any, or even know what bait was. The boy tucked his chin into his chest, looked up at the old fisherman with wide eyes and a pouted lip, and shook his head.

The big, round fisherman turned on the rock and went back to his spot, where he rustled around in a plastic bag before returning with a little brown earthworm between his fleshy fingers. Taking the boy's hook from him he penetrated the membrane expertly. This disgusted and amused the boy, in that order. Coyly, he nodded a 'thank you' to the fisherman, and tongued the white-green algae that was dripping from his nose. Then he wiped it with his sleeve that was wrapped round his wrist and hand, bent like a claw.

The fisherman was charmed, if still a bit confused and worried about the boy. Reluctantly he returned to his spot, and watched the boy with a wondering eye. Then he picked his rod from its hole, and spun its reel effortlessly.

Stumbling, the boy tried to imitate what he had seen the older men do: casting their line with ease. He struggled as the frustration swelled in him. He didn't know that he had to release the line before it was cast. He thought that just by thrusting the rod towards the sea, the line would somehow release and fly outwards with a plop. Clearly becoming frustrated, the boy began to force the rod back and forth aggressively as the winds picked up around him and the sea aggressively baptized him.

Noticing him struggle, the big fisherman went to help. He took one step in his direction then jumped back with a fright as he saw the boy try to cast again, just as a huge, frothy white wave smashed the rocks and engulfed him. His rod went up in the air in an ark and disappeared in the drink as he fell backwards and was sucked and dragged down towards the water's edge.

The old man made one final leap towards the boy just as he was about to disappear into the deep, rough water. Swiping with his arm he caught him by the hood and pulled against the sea and the rock to get the boy to safety.

Coughing and spurting seawater and gasping for air as he blinked his eyes rapidly, the boy smiled a great smile, shaking his arms and laughing excitedly as if to say 'gain!'

The seagulls gathered overhead by the dozen and wailed hungrily.

Clearly unnerved by what had happened, and the boy's reaction, with care they rushed about him, wiping the long green bogey sliding around his face, and removing his soaking wet, thin coat to replace it with one of their own: warm, dry and musty.

They asked the boy where he lived, and he pointed with a shaky arm back through the harbour mouth and to his dad's house, just visible and grey behind the rain on the other side of the harbour. Looking inquisitively at the house, then at the boy, the old men shook their heads from side to side as the raindrops swung back and forth off their waterproof hats.

'Mon we'll get you hame laddie.'

Traipsing up and down over the jagged rocks, round the white birdshit-clad mouth, over the bumpy cobbled stones they go—the little boy tripping up and shaking. They pass the bollards and the

back wall, pass the mountain of green and orange decorations, go up and over the arched bridge with the chains banging and clanging, then up the steps to his dad's front door.

Knocking on the door with a rattle, the fishermen stood, the boy beside them dripping, wet, and tired in the rain. No answer. With increasing urgency the fisherman rasped the door again. No avail. This time the fisherman, before nearly breaking through the pane-glass door with his fist, was confronted by a dishevelled-looking man in loose-fitting tattered jeans with a white brown-stained vest top hanging squint on his misshapen tattooed body. Beer can in hand.

'Whit's aw this then?' the dad asked with dozy nonchalance.

'Whit's aw this? WHIT'S AW FUCKIN THIS?! Whit ye daein sending yer laddie oot alone on a night like this?' The fisherman ranted protectively, holding onto the boy's shoulders before pushing him aside and shaking an angry fist in the father's face.

'He wanted tae go fishin.'

'He wanted tae go fishin? HE WANTED TO GO FUCKIN FISHIN?! Next time come wi um or keep um at hame. The boy nearly drowned oot there. Fuck's sake.' The fisherman fumed, then turned to the boy and told him to get inside and get warmed up. Reluctantly the old fisherman left.

Back in the gloom of that house the shamed man took the boy to the bare bathroom, told him to wash and get to bed, then took up his position in front of the TV screen.

The boy washed in the still and tepid water of the bath and ran through the excitement of the sea in his head. Shaking up his

bathwater into a storm and rocking himself backwards and forwards by the handles to make waves that ran the length of it.

After a short while he got bored, changed into the pyjamas his mum had packed for him, and returned to see the man in the living room. He stood by the door, looking over at him in wonder.

'Get tae yer bed.'

Turning quickly and returning the way he had come, the boy trudged up the stairs and back into the bare bedroom where his brother still sat playing *Abe's Odyssey*.

The brother glanced at him as he entered, then returned his eyes to the television screen.

'What have you been uptae?' he asked.

'Fishin,' replied the boy.

Erinyes

Robert Jopson

Originally from Liverpool and currently living in an occupied abandoned town in La Rioja, I have been publishing poetry for 4 years. Currently writing in both English and Castellano and occasionally planting potatoes, I can be found on poetrybyrobertjopson.wordpress.com and as Robert Jopson Poet on facebook.

Whistles the muse,
clear and hollow,
scorches buds,
lays low the swallow.

Swallows the muse,
in unstained tallow,
welds it's hand,
to hill and barrow.

Clay is set,
with burnt bones, lime
scalds children's
hands and eyes.

Catches lips,
on chips in cups,
the unpinned curtain’s,
corners up.

Wind is silent,
only touch,
of handtraced waves,
still won't shut.

The curtain corner,
lets soundless come,
cold white whistle,
of muses dumb.

Class and Kambridge

Josh Askew

I come from a long line of parasites. Like Grandad, my dad was a serf for a feudal lord. I know this sounds archaic. It was. In exchange for his labour, Dad received a free house and minimum wage salary from a family who had owned our local area since the 1500s.

Feudalism is alive and kicking in the UK, baby.

Of course, we survived off the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. But, despite the free school meals, this arrangement meant I went to a decent, well-funded school. If Dad had been a wage bod, like the rest of us, a house in this catchment would have been out of the question for our family, alongside pretty much everyone else in the country.

This gave me an opportunity many others don't have: education. I studied hard, one thing led to another, and I got a place on a master's at Cambridge. A freak, anomaly, glitch in the Matrix, call it what you like, all I know is that I felt like things were on the up.

Then it all kicked off. Six months before I was supposed to leave, Dad threw a wobbly, got sacked and disappeared. This left my mum, who herself had grappled with long stretches of unemployment and mental illness, penniless and sofa surfing. It was a spanner in the works, to say the least. It was clear that I would have to work at the local factory to support my mum and sister—bye bye dreams!

Even Marx had his Engels

Now came my turn to be a parasite.

Feeling chancy, I emailed Cambridge explaining my situation and asked for some assistance. It has got to be worth a try, I thought. With net assets of over £12.5 billion, I am sure they have a few quid spare. Days passed and, predictably, nothing. Then: fee reduction. I couldn't believe my eyes. Blag of the century.

Before we start blowing smoke up their arse, this still left several thousand pounds to cough up. (There's a reason why Cambridge has so much money—they don't like to share it.) Here comes the next loophole. While at uni, I had befriended a girl who, it turned out, was a wealthy orphan. Her riches had come from tragic circumstances, besides some old-fashioned capital accumulation. Luckily for me, she was willing to share.

From the off, I should say that this puts me in a difficult class position. While my origins and economic background are working class, in other ways I am less so. Not everyone has a patron—sadly. But I guess this is usually the case. All-embracing concepts like class, which work in abstract discussions, rarely apply neatly to individuals. Reality is far more contradictory, not to mention confusing.

Fake it till you make it

The first thing that hit when I walked through those pearly gates was a nasty case of imposter syndrome. Aside from the certainty that my place was due to a hangover in the admissions office, I felt like I was a right numpty. It was only a matter of time before I was sniffed out and escorted off the premises.

Fortunately, I had a trick up my sleeve. At a nearby charity shop, I

brought a second-hand black suit jacket and a pair of shiny shoes. A poor disguise? Probably. Did I look like a dick? Almost certainly. Yet, with this battle armour, I felt slightly more prepared.

Tellingly, the poshest students were often the most casually dressed. Fleeces, hoodies, chinos, it was like they were not even trying. Although I guess they had nothing to prove.

My cheap confidence trick reflects something deeper. Cambridge's acceptance rate is over twenty percent. This doesn't sound like a lot. But, as far as universities go, it ain't half bad. The problem is working-class kids write it off or are not encouraged to apply. Irrespective of ability, we assume that somewhere like that is not *for* us. Together with other colossal economic and social hurdles, this acts as a barrier to working-class participation. After all, as much as it is economic, poverty is a social phenomenon, affecting how you see yourself and the world.

Shit and carpet

Once I stopped acting like a flannel head, I was able to really look around. And that is when I saw it: a hideous machine for manufacturing elitism.

Everything in that place is designed to establish difference: insiders/outsiders, us/them—in short, class relations. The first and most jarring is between students and the town. After formal hall, essentially a heavily subsidised dinner-come-piss-up where everyone wears black capes, students pile into local pubs. It is cringeworthy. They bunch together in their ridiculous outfits, swigging back wine and bellowing, while the other punters look on. It is clear what they are thinking: twats.

Don't get me wrong. I am not going to pretend that I was not one of them. Although I was lucky—I encountered all of this when I

The problem is working-class kids write it off or are not encouraged to apply. Irrespective of ability, we assume that somewhere like that is not for us. Together with other colossal economic and social hurdles, this acts as a barrier to working-class participation. After all, as much as it is economic, poverty is a social phenomenon, affecting how you see yourself and the world.

was older and had been around the block a bit. I could take it with a pinch of salt, well at least I hope so anyway. Yet what about an eighteen-year-old? These girls and boys have spent their entire lives in quadrangles, first at boarding school and now university. How do you think they will view themselves and their position in society, if they are served dinner every night in a fucking cape?

More sinister distinctions lurk within the place itself. If a student gets a first during their second year, they can don striped robes. When senior staff and their cronies enter the dining hall, everyone else is made to get up, stand behind their chairs and remain silent until they are seated. Even the bloody carpet changes between areas depending on who they are for, not only in thickness, but colour, lavishness.

By now, I probably sound like I have lost the plot, harping on about carpet like this. Yet it is important. All these subtleties instil in students a sense of hierarchy and, more importantly, how to practise it. Where do you think the ruling class's obsessions with uniforms, rituals and classification come from? This shit is actively made and reproduced.

Don't be fooled

Exposing elitism as bullshit is easy. Personally, I believe we are all as blinkered as each other. However, the superficiality of Cambridge is next level. While creepy gothic architecture towers over pristine lawns—something that is designed to intimidate onlookers—inside is usually shabby and dilapidated. Urinals reek of piss, paint peels off walls and rooms cry out for Nick Noles.

Still, it can easily turn you into a see-you-next-Tuesday. A great example is the porters who guard the entrances and exits. Despite being at the grizzly end of the pay scale, they are often some of the most pompous characters out there, embodying all the stuffy

poshness to the nth degree. Once I addressed one as ‘mate’ to which he replied ‘It is “sir” to you.’ False consciousness? Or was he simply a prick? I couldn’t really tell.

Yet, I felt elitism most strongly in the classroom. It was the odd smirk when I used slang; the faux disbelief if I didn’t know something (how could you not know *that*); or the silent note that I held my cutlery like a chimp. Maybe it was skunk-induced paranoia, but I felt like everyone was taking the piss. I was always second guessing that people thought I was a chavvy little shithead, who was only there to fill up some diversity quota.

Definitely too much dope.

Right here is how power functions. It is not that individuals are necessarily smarter than others, rather the education system favours one group’s ‘way of speaking’ over other's. Working-class vocabulary and expression are devalued and dismissed, irrespective of the ideas expressed. Especially in academia, where form is more important than content; the game is rigged against those on the outside.

Sorry, I digress. Where was I? Oh yeah, slagging off Cambridge. Another oddity about that place is the large number of students who profess to be left wing. Teary eyed and in impassioned tones, they would discuss ‘the working classes’. Believe it or not, I once saw someone named Moses call for a proletarian revolution underneath a chandelier.

Cheers, Moses. The only problem is that, as soon as I met these firebrands, it was pretty apparent that they had never even had a conversation with the people they claimed to represent. Well, at least not anything more than, ‘I’ll have chips, please.’ Sometimes I would imagine them meeting people back home and saying they knew about their struggles. It was laughable. Their speech, dress, persona—everything would be completely and utterly alienating.

For sure, I am not trying to discredit these people. Their sentiment is good ... ish. Only I was often left wondering to what extent genuine understanding, empathy, and solidarity is possible between such capital heavy individuals and the poor.

Twat

And then strange shit started happening. Next thing I knew I was parroting their waffly jargon. At dinner, my elbows became bolted to my sides. I started laying a napkin on my lap. Each act a small step on the road to knobbingdom.

In fact, one of the profoundest 'lessons' of Cambridge was how to conceal parts of my identity and feign others. Questions like 'What does your mum do?' were suddenly answered with 'She's a pharmacist.' (My mum worked in a pharmacy.) Of course, such inauthenticity is toxic, not to mention ridiculous. But when you are in a group and all eyes turn to you, it is hard not to want to fit in. Everyone needs to feel accepted, especially when you are in a new place, far away from home.

Back home, I felt changed, at times, alien. The differences between the two worlds were stark. I disliked that my mum's new place didn't have space for a dinner table. I pissed her off with my wanky uni chat. ('Not everything's a sociology lesson' became her favourite reply.)

Yet this is all trivial. Mostly, I was proud of my family. I was proud of my mum who had kept the baby at sixteen and done her best to protect us from the forces trying to make our lives shit. Hats off to her. Ignoring his recent fuck-up, I saw how well my dad had done, considering his own father had been in prison and he had spent most of his childhood sniffing glue and beachcombing, instead of going to school.

A fortnight ago I read that this year Cambridge had admitted more

students from one London comp than from Eton for the first time. Well, wooptie doo. Shit the bed. Only a couple of years too late. All jokes aside, surely this is good news.

Or is it? For the reasons I have badly explained, students from lower-class backgrounds will be invariably affected by Cambridge. Some will resist, certainly. Many won't. They'll learn to masquerade, adapt, change, hob-knob, rule. Soon the robes will be replaced by suits and these students, who could have mounted a critique of society or resistance to capital, will find themselves perpetuating the very system of violence and inequality that once screwed them.

Then again, what do I know? I am just a parasite.

***

Joshua Askew is a freelance journalist and writer. From grafting in factories, learning Persian in Tehran, documenting border violence in Greece, to pedalling Deliveroo, there are few things he has not found himself doing. Bad jokes, shabby analysis and clichés, his writing has it all.

At The Windows

Penny Pepper

Barbara Pett grabs Alan by the hand and drags him into the garden. Desperate for a cigarette but not sure if she's got any, always surprised when they run out.

'But it's cold, Mum. Do I have to?'

She looks down at Alan and doesn't feel much at all. Only a tiny twist in her guts.

'The social worker's here. Play with your toys. Come on, I'll put them on the table.' She yanks him harder and he stumbles as they move. But she knows it's good for him.

The garden is a tip and always has been a tip especially since *he* left, went off with the fat woman from the corner shop. There's weeds, broken toys, the orange space hopper the bastard slit with a knife, and the stained mattress he dumped. As she sits Alan on a plastic chair more roughly than she means, he whimpers, 'Legs, Mum, legs,' and she clicks the edges of the metal braces so they bend and his legs fall down.

There's an insistent tapping on the window. The damn social worker. Contorting her face she pulls a cooperative expression, then scoops up a pile of random toys.

Mr Bagely tries to open the window but she knows it's stuck down with glue. The surprise on his face turns to exasperation and he

waves at her like a cross headmaster.

'Fucking bastard,' she mutters.

'Fucking bastard,' whispers Alan.

The flick she gives him on his head is harder than she expected but Alan doesn't cry. He picks up an Action Man solemnly.

Kissing his head, Barbara feels the tears well up and as she goes back inside—she doesn't know if they're for him or for her.

*

Alan's stomach grips tight as he's never been left out here before, so far away from the house. Sometimes he can walk a bit but today is cold and his bomber jacket has holes in it. Mum might forget him but he decides not to think about that unless it gets really dark.

The Action Man has no arms. He doesn't remember pulling them off but he does remember Dad buying it from the charity shop. Some kid had drawn on its back. Alan told Dad he didn't want it. Dad called him an ungrateful little spastic and thumped his head.

Dad calls that fat woman from the corner shop Sharon. He hasn't met her yet. Mum screamed one day—it was because Sharon called Alan a spaz, and said she wasn't taking any stinky kid like him to her toilet. Mum had said no to any visits after that, and cuddled him until he fell asleep. He smiles to remember.

Alan picks up his big Dinky truck, throws the Action Man back onto the table and smashes it until the legs come off and its head is flattened.

'That'll teach you,' he says. He might have funny legs, his *bifdar* legs, but his arms are really strong. *Bifdar, bifdar, spina bifida.* The words were in his head but he couldn't always say them right, the thing he has wrong with him.

Alan turns towards the house and tries to look through the window but it's so far away and it's starting to get dark. There's a loud bang next door and he looks to see kids at the upstairs window. They pull faces at him and do spaz movements with their hands.

*

Barbara sits opposite Mr Bagely. Papers on his knee as he holds up a page. Squinting, she takes her time with the letters. 'Barbara Pett.' Yes, that was her and most people called her Babs, though *he* had called her Barb. She hoped there wouldn't be much to read.

Hunched up on the sofa, shaking her head, Babs can hear the radio she left on in the kitchen. 'Do ya think I'm sexy?' crackles out and for a few seconds she dreams she's married to Rod. No money worries there, no lack of ciggies, though maybe he wouldn't let her smoke in the house.

Lucky squirms beside her, tail tucked under her little dog-bottom. Bagely is ticking forms with a blue pen.

Tick, tick, tick.

'No one meant anything. It was a game,' said Mr Ian Pett. Katie, screaming and screaming and scared to go off in the ambulance. 'Silly bitch,' he would say. 'What a fuss, only a little accident.'

Babs always wondered who was next. She didn't care about herself but she couldn't bear anything to happen to her poor little Al.

'Can we get on with it and sign?' she growled, hand outstretched to grab the pen. 'This isn't easy for me, you know.'

*

Snow falls from the grey sky. Alan tries again to look through the window, watching their mouths move, wishing he could hear the words.

Babs always wondered who was next. She didn't care about herself but she couldn't bear anything to happen to her poor little AI.

Dad was always full of words and said a lot of things. Yelling that Mum was a bitch, a whore, a slut, a slag. He didn't know what they all meant exactly but from how Dad shouted them he knew they weren't nice.

Snow lands on his face, his eyelashes. He pushes his tongue out to feel the flakes melt as they land. It makes him want to rush indoors and clasp his frozen arms around Mum and say sorry.

Action Man gets covered in snow and Alan feels sad he smashed his head in. He can see the adults talking and, deciding he can't wait for Mum, launches himself forward to make the leg callipers click straight. With eyes narrowed he looks at the ground and tries to imagine he's in a film, like *The Deer Hunter,* which Gran said he was too young to watch but Dad let him anyway.

Snow starts to settle as he takes his first step, a heavy swing of his left leg. The ground is bumpy and there's not much to hold on to. He dreads falling on the grass now—it's Lucky's toilet. Her turds are small, but there's a lot of them. Another step as he grabs the edge of a rusty wheelbarrow. It wobbles and he tries to steady himself, snow making his face too wet. When he does fall down, he's relieved it's near the dirty mattress and he doesn't hurt himself much at all.

*

Mum cries out his name, picking him up, holding him tight against her tits which he loves even though Dad called them 'useless pancakes'.

Babs looks at him, feels a tear sliding down her cheek. She's signed now; it's for the best.

Alan likes the warmth that hits his face when they go into the living

room, grateful that Mum put the blow heater on twenty minutes before Mr Bagely was due. 'I'm not that uncaring,' she'd said, and Alan wasn't sure if she was joking.

She puts him on the sofa. Lucky looks up but since the Katie accident, she never wags her tail.

Alan notices Mum has his Thunderbirds suitcase open at her feet. Mr Bagely stands up, nodding his head, saying yes to a question Alan hasn't been asked.

'It's the right decision,' he says in his posh voice. 'Particularly when we consider the father felt the child should not have been born and the risks Mr Pett still poses to you all.'

'Dad calls me 'useless meat', Alan whispers. 'What did he mean, Mum?'

His mum won't look at him as she bends down, crying, and pats the clothes in his case before closing the lid.

***

Penny Pepper is an award-winning author, poet, and disabled activist. A genre-defying writer, her work focuses on inequality and identity and stories we haven't heard, making others see life differently, with humour and wisdom.

Groundbreaking publications include her memoir, *First in The World Somewhere* (Unbound) and poetry collection, *Come Home Alive*, (Burning Eye Books).

Recent recognition includes: Penny's sombre monologue prize winner, 'Letter to Paul' celebrating 2020 International Day

of Disabled People and a winning finalist of prestigious 2021 Hemingway Shorts competition.

Having grown up on council estates around Slough—where class divisions are savage—Penny now lives in Hastings.

Contact: @thepennypepper on Instagram

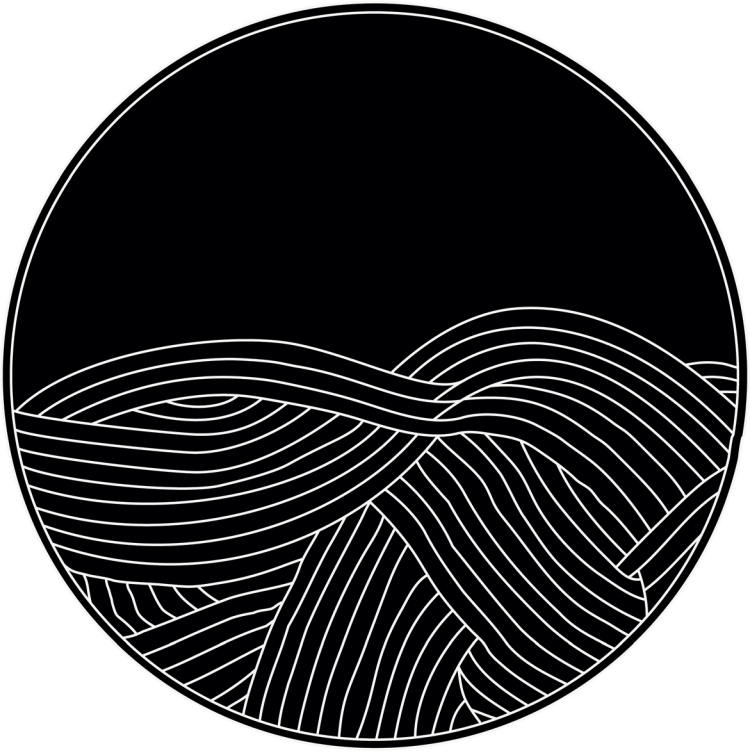
Photo by Dad. Michael Wright, 1962

Drift

Tom Stevens

Categorically limp-wristed
None of my dreams came true, Papa …
Hostile architecture
Folly roads
Broken infrastructure
A small and painful spot
Not a storm but a maelstrom
All part of a robust economy
The red spot of Jupiter

We're all so many cartoon heads behind the windscreen
So many caricatures,
None of my dreams came true.



***

Tom Stevens is a 26-year-old writer currently living in Bristol, UK. Working as a gravedigger and gardener, he writes poetry, short stories, and some (mainly environmental) non-fiction. Check out miragesofleavesinspring.blogspot.com for more writing and shoot your comments to stevens.tom.kingscourt@hotmail.co.uk

LUM
PEN.

How to Guide for Writing (With Us).

Here are 9 points you need to know:

1. We only accept writing from those who identify as working class or have experienced long-term involuntary poverty and economic hardship.

2. We may accept writing of all length, but generally we look for anything between 2,000 and 4,000 words.

3. We accept all styles of writing—fiction, non-fiction and everything else.

4. For each issue we will suggest several themes and questions. If you want to write about something beyond these drop us an email as we might be planning a later issue that fits with it better.

5. If you've never written before or are lacking in confidence in your writing, get in touch. We can give support with your piece of writing, and devise different strategies with you to get your ideas out of your head onto the paper. For example one article for a future issue, will be a transcribed interview with a working-class organiser.

6. Don't worry if you're not confident about spelling, grammar, sounding educated enough. What we're interested in is hearing your ideas based on your lived experiences.

7. Concerned about style? Don't be, we're happy to publish openly angry rants written in staccato rhythm or fictional narratives about killer avocados on toast and everything else inbetween. Whatever voice you feel comfortable using.

8. Please title your work. If you can't think of one we can help you find one

9. Name yourself as you would like to see it printed, or state if you would like to remain anonymous.

Happy Writing!

Tips for worriers:

Don't know where to start? Start in the middle. Just try to get your ideas down on paper. It's all practice.

Redrafting is everything. If you don't like your first draft, that means you are ready to improve on your writing.

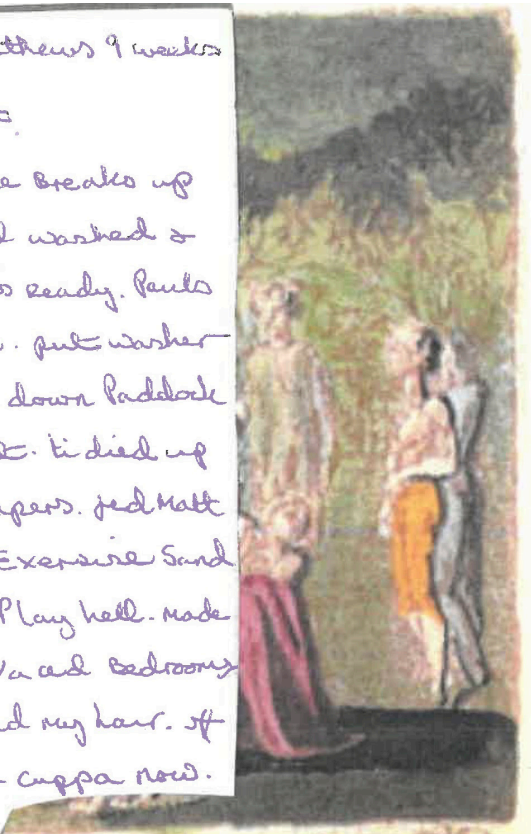
Get in Contact:

info@theclassworkproject.com
www.theclassworkproject.com

Matthews 9 weeks

Thursday September 21st.

got up at 8. Bills gone, he breaks up for a week tomorrow. fed washed & changed matthew. got us ready. Pauls gone, took Andy. lit fire. put washer on. its a nice day. been down Paddock to shops. put washing out. it dried up had dinner. washed jumpers. fed Matthew. bought myself some Exercise Sand als, I expect Bill will Play hell. made Beds, cleaned Bathroom. Vac'd Bedrooms done stair steps. washed my hair. off to have a sit down & a cuppa now. matthew wont settle



The Ecchoing Green

The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring.
To welcome the Spring.
The sky-lark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around, Set table

been for Andrew. made Pie chips & Beans for tea. Bills not speaking to me again. Washed up. got Snap up Coal in & washing. cut Paul & Andys hair, put em to Bed. Reading hard Some Beer & fish n chips. worked Bill why he's not Speaking. Says he is. could have Spoken to me. Bed at 12.

Collage from *Songs of the English Working Class/The Making of Experience* by Matt Travers

ISBN 978-1-914125-08-9
9 781914 125089